

REPORT TO AGM FEBRUARY 2010

The General Election will be called in little over a month's time and then it will be helter-skelter all the way to Polling Day on 6 May. We get one shot at it so we've got to work hard over the coming weeks to get people on our side. They are not stampeding towards the Conservatives.

We have a good story to tell. In education and in health, in regeneration and housing £millions have come into this area and the evidence is there all around. However, we can't expect people to be grateful – that is not the way the system works. But evidence of what we have done in the past reinforces our message for the future that a new Labour Government can continue to transform people's lives.

To win, we need to squeeze the Lib Dem vote and we are fortunate that their candidate is so totally ineffectual. Ladbrokes give Afzal Anwar odds at 40-1, but this is way too generous. As for the Conservatives, I shall continue to shout from the rooftops that they have been bankrolled by a tax exile. They can always sue me – but they won't. Truth is an absolute defence.

In fact, the Conservative campaign is looking decidedly fragile. There have been contradictions and "mis-statements" (such as the confusion over whether marriage would be recognised by the tax system) and the net effect is to raise doubts in the minds of the electorate. We can see how the polls are narrowing and while this should give us encouragement, it will produce huge consternation at Conservative Central Office.

NEWS OF THE WORLD

The latest revelation from the Guardian about the Conservative Party's Director of Communications, Andy Coulson, are jaw-dropping. Coulson, Cameron's right hand man, is alleged to have brought on to the pay-roll at the News of the World, when he was Editor, a man sentenced to seven years for blackmail and who is now awaiting trial for serious assault. The question is whether Coulson knew of this record when he was hired. Last year, Coulson, previously the Deputy Editor and then Editor of the News of the World, told a Commons Committee he knew nothing about the illegal activities of the people in the pay of his own newspaper. He has some explaining to do.

My Ashcroft campaign rolls on and I have an amendment down to the Constitutional Reform and Governance Bill next Tuesday which would lay a duty on the House of Lords Appointments Commission to satisfy itself that people who got a peerage because they promised to do something actually did it. I think the whole theme of the Conservatives buying the Election will have a strong resonance and I am sure that the media will be interested in what happens here during the campaign and on Polling Day.

Over recent weeks we have seen attacks on the Prime Minister increase in intensity, culminating in the allegations of bullying at number ten. No one denies that Broon has a temper but I am not sure that bothers people. The aptly named Mrs. Pratt of the Bullying Helpline sought to capitalise on the revelations, but it has all blown up spectacularly in her face. As succession of actions brought by her, claiming she was a

victim of bullying and harassment herself, all laid out in the Daily Mail, spoke volumes.

I doubt if Andrew Rawnsley's new book "The End of the Party" will change the political weather. So what if Darling had an argument with Brown. So what if Brown screamed at Blair "you've ruined my life!" People have known for years that the Brown – Blair duopoly has always been tempestuous. I think each revelation has less impact ^{than} on the one before.

Locally, I have been out and about, with a Roving Surgery in Barnoldswick tomorrow and an interview in Nelson with BBC Radio 5 Live. Earlier today I visited Merc Engineering in Barrowford, where over 50 highly skilled engineers turn out quality products for the aerospace, defence and transport industries and much else. I was seriously impressed by what I saw and the drive to get new business.

The week before I visited Regal Precision Engineering, whose work is mainly in aerospace and, here again, we see a business, tucked away in Colne, which is world class.

On a lighter note, I had an enjoyable evening at the Colne Beer Festival, sampling a selection of the brews on offer. Down at Westminster I met two separate groups of students from Nelson & Colne College who quizzed me on the work I do. I always find talking to the young people very rewarding

TWEET TWEET!

You may have noticed that I am now blogging and tweeting as well as living and breathing! Social networking in this way will, I am sure, shape elections in the future. I think people do want to get into on-line conversations with MPs – and, no doubt, candidates and why not? People have the right to know what candidates for Parliament really believe.

Two big local issues. I shall be meeting the Trustees of Islamic Help towards the end of March. The meeting will be at Westminster and I have asked the Charity Commission to sit in on it. I hope that we will be able to fill in the blanks so far as the future of Brierfield Mills is concerned. I shall have a thousand questions to ask them.

On the other burning issue – the Burnley Urgent Care Centre Review – things are moving forward, albeit slowly. I want people who have something to say about the UCC to be offered a chance to say it directly to the Director of Emergency & Urgent Care, Professor Cooke, who will be leading the Review.

One final point. I see that Andrew Stephenson has been banging on about Housing Benefit and how it should be paid direct to landlords. I think he is on the wrong side of the argument. I think people should take responsibility for managing their money and for the State to do it for them is surely the mark of the Nanny State.

GORDON PRENTICE MP

26.2.10

REPORT TO GC JANUARY 2010

We are now in the home straight with the General Election fourteen weeks away and the bookies are predicting a Conservative victory here in Pendle. Ladbrokes are offering 11-2 on for a Conservative win; Labour 7-2 and the Lib Dems, rank outsiders at 40-1. That's the bad news. But the good news is that we have time to close the gap if we work at it.

Stephenson's campaign has been lubricated by Ashcroft's money and I learned today that my FoI request, concerning the undertaking Ashcroft gave while being considered for a peerage, has been upheld. In a 36 page decision, the Information Commissioner has ordered the Cabinet Office to tell me the form of the undertaking and to whom it was given. This doesn't sound like earth shattering news of itself, but I will use it to smoke-out Ashcroft and force him to disclose if he has been a UK tax payer since 2000. That is what he promised.

The story will be covered in the Independent and the Guardian on Monday (it is embargoed till then) and comes on the day the House of Commons is considering the tax status of MPs and Peers in new clauses and amendments to the Constitutional Reform and Governance Bill. As you know, I had a Private Members Bill on this two years ago but it ran into the sand for procedural reasons. Last year, I managed to force a change in the Political Parties and Election Act 2009 which stopped non-doms giving big money to political parties. My amendments coming up on Monday would prevent non UK tax payers from sitting in Parliament and would be retrospective to 2000- specifically to catch the evil Ashcroft!

We already know of one tax exile Peer; the former Vice Chairman of the Conservative Party, Lord Laidlaw, who has given around £3 million to the Conservatives. Irvine Laidlaw was "elevated" to the Lords in 2004 and now lives in Monaco. He promised the House of Lords Appointments Commission that he would bring his tax affairs on shore but he famously reneged on that commitment

All through this month, the Iraq Inquiry has been taking centre stage with the former Prime Minister appearing earlier today. I came to the conclusion some time ago that most of the Inquiry Panel are totally useless, Baroness Prashar is a total embarrassment and a couple of the others seem incapable of thinking on their feet. The recent performance of Geoff Hoon was woeful. He was absent from some key meetings and gave the impression he was detached from the whole process. Jack Straw on the other hand, announced that if he had taken a different view then we would not have gone to war. He saw himself as a key player.

Although I was always in favour of having an inquiry into Iraq, I despaired when I heard Brown offer to go before Chilcott before the Election. Chilcott had intended to suspend the Inquiry at the end of this month, but now, alas, it will roll on towards the General Election.

Talking of Hoon, as I was earlier, he was of course, the co-author of the coup that fizzled out. They both badly misjudged the mood of the PLP and the wider party and they embarked on an adventure which could have done us much damage. At this

stage, there was never any possibility of dislodging the Prime Minister and even their recommended solution (a simple vote in the PLP) is outside the Party rules.

In the forthcoming Election we have to focus on the positives and minimise the negatives. It is difficult to justify the growing wealth gap between the richest and poorest which has occurred on our watch. But we should not compound this by allowing the Mandelson's of this world to talk about getting the new 50p tax rate down just as soon as possible. And, of course, it does not help when the former Prime Minister takes £200,000 from the hedge fund people Landsdowne, whomade £100 million out of the collapse of Northern Rock and donate to the Conservatives.

For much of this week at Westminster I have been in the company of a group of Afghan MPs including the Speaker of their Lower House, Younus Qanooni, and another MP who was an asylum seeker here in the UK who subsequently got UK citizenship! Afghanistan clearly has a long way to go before it can stand on its own two feet. And before that happens, there must be some big political changes. We need a consolidation of the 107 political parties and a crack-down on the corruption which is everywhere.

Closer to home, health issues continue to catch the headlines. Earlier today I met with local health chiefs to discuss the forthcoming review of Burnley's Urgent Care Centre, the Ambulance Service and Colne Health Centre. The review will be up and running soon and I made it clear that I expect the Review Team to invite the Conservative Health Spokesman, Andrew Lansley as well as Burnley and Pendle Councils to give evidence. I also want to see Gordon Birtwistle lay down the candle he uses in his vigil and put his concerns to the Review Team. The report is scheduled for publication at the end of March, for obvious reasons this cannot be allowed to slip.

Elsewhere, the big issue has been the sale of Brierfield Mills to the Birmingham based charity, Islamic Help. As you know, I believe the charity is operating outside its charitable objects and I have the Charity Commission on the case. They will be meeting the Trustees on Tuesday of next week. The big question is where the money came from and I hope we shall find out in due course. The role of Afzal Anwar is still opaque, but with the election coming up he will have to explain himself before an audience wider than the Liberal Democrats.

Over in Burnley, Burnley College has been sold to another Birmingham based charity who plan to open a 1500 strong college for girls with 300 boarders. This is outside the patch, but could have an impact on us here although the college would be independent and fee paying. I have been reading material from Ted Cantle, the community cohesion guru, who wants young people to grow up and mix together and learn from each other's cultures. These developments, in my view, are a very big mistake.

There are a significant number of loose ends which still have to be tied up before the General Election. The future of the Royal Mail is one and I am hopeful that the departure of Adam Crozier to the tinsel world of television may open up discussions which have been going nowhere fast. The Royal Mail pension deficit urgently needs fixing.

I am tapping this out on the train as it speeds north on the East Coast Main Line. Now in public ownership again after National Express failed to pay the Treasury the money owed under the terms of the franchise. I read in the press today that the company is also going to lose its lucrative East Anglia contract when it comes up for renewal in March 2011. Quite right too!

It has been an interesting week at Westminster as the debate on the Queen's Speech drew to a close yesterday. Because of the looming General Election, not all the Bills will get on to the Statute Book – and some don't deserve to! The Fiscal Responsibility Bill which sets down in law the targets for reducing the debt we amassed by bailing out the banks falls into the silly category. What happens if the target is not met in four year's time. Does the Chancellor of the Exchequer go to jail? Of course not.

On the positive side we have the Agency Workers regulations which will ensure that the same basic terms and conditions apply to agency and permanent workers. Without this protection there will be a relentless drive by rogue employers to take on temporary staff, underpay them, and undermine the conditions of the permanent staff.

There is also a short Bill to ban the use of cluster munitions. And another (much longer one) on constitutional reform which puts the civil service on a statutory footing and allows for the expulsion – and retirement – of peers from the House of Lords. The reform of the Lords is, alas, like the dance of the seven veils. Never getting to the end of the show.

We also have the Financial Services Bill coming up on Monday. It will give new powers to the financial watchdog, the FSA, and bring in measures to curb bankers' bonuses and so on. So far as I am concerned it doesn't go far enough. It will enact the recommendations of the Walker Report which wants financial institutions to publish the total number of people "earning" over £1 million a year. We should be naming in annual reports the individuals who are "earning" over £200,000 or even less.

The banks are legitimate targets. They have been bailed out with our money. And they owe a responsibility to the wider economy and not just to their own industry and its featherbedding at our expense.

The cost of servicing the debt is going to be huge. The outspoken chief of the FSA, Adair Turner, has said on the record that many of the activities of the financial sector were not "socially useful". He told the Daily Telegraph on Monday that we need to rebalance the financial system "towards the economy rather than to the financial community as an end to itself".

He went on: "The thing about the crisis was that it had nothing to do with the things that used to worry us. It was not due to trade unions, to wage claims, strikes or out of control

Nick Clegg:
bold & savage cuts
- need 3 months

inflation. It was cooked up within the financial sector itself. We need a new set of rules for that."

Against that background, claims by the Conservatives that this is a crisis of Labour's own making is simply ludicrous. They were calling for more deregulation when, in reality, we should have been tightening financial regulation even further. As I told the GC last month, Cameron sees the State as the enemy. Not the bankers. The claims the State is too big and must be cut down to size.

He talks about a new "Age of Austerity" and has promised a wage freeze for all public sector workers earning above £18,000. Retirement age is to be postponed by a year. The Child Trust Fund cur back. And yet he will still give a huge inheritance tax break to the very wealthiest estates in the country.

Perhaps because of this, enthusiasm for Cameron seems to be cooling slightly although the Conservatives are still clearly favourites to win the next General Election. But the Ipsos Mori poll in last Sunday's Observer gave the Conservatives a slender 6 point lead over Labour. A rogue poll? Probably. But one that reminded everybody that the election is not over until the fat lady sings.

Outside Westminster, the Iraq Inquiry got underway with feeble, meandering questioning. Whether its format will allow it to get to the truth is debateable. But if witnesses speak out – as Sir Jeremy Greenstock did earlier today – something may be salvaged from it all.

Earlier this month, I entered the portals of South Africa House, on Trafalgar Square, for the first time ever. I had, however, demonstrated outside on many occasions over the years!

On local issues, I met Rolls Royce union reps down at Westminster for an update on developments after the company had received squillions from the Government to set up advanced manufacturing facilities.

I spoke at the SELRAP conference in Skipton in early November with David Curry as part of the double act. I also had a series of meetings on health issues – with Peter Pike and Ian Woolley and then with the Health Secretary, Andy Burnham. I am meeting the Ambulance people next Friday.

Gordon Prentice MP
27 November 2009

- Pre Budget Report

- No money from central Lib Party

Parallel School for girls - Islamic Help

REPORT TO GC – OCTOBER 2009-10-30

It has been a busy and tumultuous month, with Parliament returning on 12 October after a ludicrously lengthy Summer Recess. The Labour Conference was a month ago and unfortunately did not give us a sustained boost in the polls. All eyes are now on Westminster to see if the Conservatives, with their huge poll lead, will hold together on the big issue of the moment – Europe.

The Conservatives have long promised a Referendum on the Lisbon Treaty, but what will they do now that it is likely to be ratified by all 27 Member States? The Poles and then the Czechs were the last to hold out and they are now signing up. If Cameron continues to promise a Referendum, what exactly will people be voting on? And if he ditches the Referendum – on the grounds that the Treaty has been brought in – he will enrage many of his foaming mouthed Europhobic supporters.

The Lisbon Treaty is good for the EU in that it will simplify the Byzantine institutional architecture and end the lunacy of rotating six month presidencies. There has been much press comment on whether Tony Blair should put his name forward as the new President of the Council. I think that would be a big mistake. The fact that Britain is not in the Euro or in the Schengen zones will count against him. And then there is Iraq.

Elsewhere, much has been written about the forthcoming second round elections in Afghanistan on 7 November. The previous election was contaminated by fraud and corruption and phantom polling stations. The whole process was totally discredited and, under pressure, President Karzai agreed a run-off was necessary. Only a handful of Muslim majority countries have functioning democracies in the sense that we understand in the West and Afghanistan is, only now, being dragged out of medievalism. Ronald Gould, a Canadian election expert who has supervised elections in more than 70 countries around the world (including an investigation in spcilt ballot papers in the last election to the Scottish Parliament) has controversially described Afghanistan as “a dead loss”. He told the main Canadian national newspaper The Globe & Mail, that “it is a waste of time at this point...focusing on elections when the country is not ready and not capable of democratic government”. He took the view that it would be better to try and nurture and embed political parties first. I put the point to the Foreign Secretary, David Miliband, when I met him on Wednesday.

As it happens, I spent a week in Ottawa earlier this month, attending a Parliamentary Seminar on the theme of “Strengthening Democracy” which was organised by the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. I found it hugely enjoyable as leader of the two person delegation! My fellow Parliamentarian was Lord Roger Roberts who shares an office at Westminster with – wait for it - Lord Tony Greaves – Aieee!

My Ashcroft campaign continues to roll forward. Ashcroft’s business dealings in Belize appeared on the front page of the Independent today and there will be a follow-up story tomorrow. I raised the huge delay in responding to my Freedom of Information request with the Cabinet Secretary at a meeting of the Public Administration Select Committee yesterday and I have warned the Information Commissioner that I intend to raise the matter in parliament in an Adjournment Debate unless I get a definitive answer by next Friday. As you know, Michael

Ashcroft was “raised” to the Peerage in 2000, after promising to bring his tax affairs on shore. In March 2000, 10, Downing Street said it raised no objections to this on the basis of undertakings that had been given by Ashcroft. I simply want to know the form of the undertaking (email, letter, verbal) and to whom it was given. This saga has been dragging on for over two years now and it needs to be resolved.

Elsewhere, the Royal Mail dispute continues to dominate the news and, unsurprisingly, the CWU has been given a roasting by most of the commentators. However, I believe that people in the street are much more receptive to the arguments – if they are allowed to hear them unfiltered by a hostile press. The Pension Fund is now in deficit as a direct result of a contribution holiday taken by successive Governments over a period of 13 years. If the Government – the sole shareholder in the Royal Mail – take responsibility for the Pension Fund, the Royal Mail’s financial position would be transformed over night. And it is simply not true that postal workers are Luddites, unwilling to embrace new technology. .

Locally the news features the proposals to transform Burnley College into a 1500 place boarding school for Muslim girls and a similar proposal for Brierfield Mills, but this time accommodating a staggering 5000 pupils. I have been relying on newspaper reports and I wait to see whether these proposals will materialise, but at the moment, I fear such developments would be a direct challenge to the Community Cohesion Agenda that we are all following here in East Lancashire. As I say, these are apparently independent charitable schools, but much more information is needed.

Still on the matter of schools. I was astonished to learn earlier this month that only 71% (50 out of 70) secondary schools newly built under the Building Schools for the Future programme, included sprinklers. It beggars belief that new schools could be built without such an elementary safeguard in place. All the schools in Lancashire, including Pendle Vale, have, fortunately, been constructed with sprinkler systems.

In Pendle, I have been out and about visiting The Nook Special School in Colne for the very first time. I think I got on very well with the boys and encouraged one who was interested in cooking, to become a chef. He was intrigued when I described the gourmet dinner at the new Farrington’s Restaurant at Nelson & Colne College which had been cooked by the students under the expert eye of Nigel Haworth. Elsewhere I dropped into the “Love Music Hate Racism” event at the ACE Centre in nelson.

On the health front, things have been moving rapidly. I met the new Chair of the East Lancashire Trust, Hazel Harding and the Acting Chief Executive, Diane Whittingham and repeated my call for an independent review of A&E. My request, unfortunately, fell on deaf ears and I raised the issue at Prime Minister’s Questions and shall be meeting the Health Secretary, Andy Burnham, on 9 November.

We also learned of the sad death of Betty Dole earlier this month. Unfortunately, I was unable to get back for the funeral, but I have many fond memories of Betty and Len, who together personified the Labour party in this part of East Lancashire.

Gordon Prentice MP

30.10.09

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illegal immigrant. Ah.
Stephen Hesford

Whitfield School.

Bad Exp
Sonia Robinson
leaves

PARLIAMENTARY REPORT TO GC:

Friday 25 September 2009

- Trut-won fees - Evan Harris
(Clegg will be a great leader
if he listened to common)
- heads got to lead.
- We struck Bargain
with Blair. You win you
make the policy.

The Lib Dem Conference is behind us. Ours is about to begin. And the Conservatives will meet in Manchester in just over a week. Parliament reassembles on 12 October after an absurdly lengthy summer recess. The final session of this Parliament opens, with all the State flummery, on 18 November and, with a blip for Christmas, we are in the run up to the General Election (probably) on Thursday 6 May 2010.

Most commentators and pundits believe we are going to be slaughtered at the ballot box. We have lost a succession of elections and by elections: European, local and Parliamentary. As I write this we are 17 points behind in the polls. Charles Clarke predicted this week that we would be "hammered".

JSF

NOTHING LEFT TO LOSE

If this is indeed the case, then we have nothing left to lose. Instead of dancing round difficult issues we should tackle them, head on. We should, for example, press for a High Pay Commission and take immediate action to stop huge bonuses. We should tightly regulate the banks and other financial institutions.

The chair of the Financial Services Authority, Lord Adair Turner, said recently that the City of London had grown "beyond a socially reasonable size" accounting for too much of national output. ~~Much of what the banks do is "socially useless"~~. Some of the banks activity, he said, is "socially useless". He said he would consider a tax on financial transactions. Phew! Just imagine if a Labour Minister had said such a thing!

I got an e mail from a local businessman yesterday complaining that the Government was going to slap a new tax of 50p a month on everyone with a fixed line telephone to help pay for new high speed broadband across the country. "What planet are you living on?" My e mailer asked. "Are we not taxed sufficiently?" He went on: "Is this to help recover from the gross overspending by the Government?"

What a nerve! We are bailing out the banks and getting brick bats for doing so! Any accusing fingers should be pointed at the bankers who brought the entire global financial system to the point of collapse.

"SAVAGE CUTS"

Despite this, the whole debate is shifting onto "cuts" and who can cut the deepest. Even the silly Nick Clegg was talking about "savage cuts". We should be talking about regulating and policing the system to make sure this cannot happen again. It means cracking down on tax havens. We should be talking about bringing in a more progressive tax policy instead of running away from the issue in case it scares the voters.

We should drop unpopular legislation which has no mandate from the Party and little support outside. The Postal Services Bill, part privatising the Royal mail, should be thrown in the dustbin.

I have no
veto at Conf.

We should act out of principle rather than out of calculation. The Prime Minister responded to President Obama's review of America's so-called "nuclear posture" by offering to get rid of one of our four Trident submarines. We should have taken a decision three years ago not to upgrade Trident which will cost up to £76,000,000,000.

And we should expose the Liberal Democrats for their vacuity. Nick Clegg (who, remember, didn't know how much the State pension was) talks of his approach as "ferocity with a purpose". What complete drivel!

Their policies on tuition fees and the so-called mansions tax are as unclear as ever.

(1)

BREAST SCREENING SCANDAL

Locally, attention, yet again, has focussed on the health service with the dreadful errors in the breast screening service where 14 women with breast cancer were not diagnosed properly and given the all clear. It is still not clear what has happened to the consultant radiologist and the hospital statement left many questions unanswered. I shall be meeting Hazel Harding, the new chair of the Hospital Trust on Tuesday to discuss the issue. I shall also be meeting for the first time the Acting Chief Executive, Diane Whittington.

(2)

Peter
Charles
Preston
2 A&E

Steve
Sloveny.

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My friend Peter Pike and Ian Woolley, a former health authority chair, have called for an independent organisation such as the medical charity, the King's Fund, to make an assessment of whether it is possible to deliver high quality health care in east Lancashire with only one A&E department. I am backing their call for a review and will be raising the issue with Hazel. (I see that Andrew Lansley, the Conservative Shadow Health Secretary, told the Lancashire Telegraph there is no reason why Burnley should not have its A&E back. We shall see.

COLNE HEALTH CENTRE

Earlier today, I had a useful session with the new Chief Executive of the Primary care Trust – now renamed "NHS East Lancashire". We covered a lot of ground: patient representation in the NHS, help for carers, dentistry and whether the Colne Health Centre would be given the go-ahead.

I also wanted to know if the PCT had a policy on whistleblowers – so if people see things which shouldn't be happening and speak out they will be protected. Reassuringly, they do. I shall be asking the same question of the Hospital trust.

I also had a very enjoyable evening at Nelson and Colne College last night where the new Farringtons Restaurant was formally opened with a delicious four course gourmet dinner, cooked on the premises under the eye of master chef, Nigel Howarth.

Earlier I visited Alkincoats Nature Reserve in Colne whose leading light is a Party member. So if there are places I should visit and people I should meet then let me or the office know.

Carol Pike

GORDON PRENTICE MP

25 September 2009

REPORT TO GC 31 JULY 2009

Parliament rose for the Recess earlier than usual on 21 July with many MPs expressing relief in getting away from the place. The last six months have been full of relentless criticism of MPs and the way the system works. The expenses scandal affected all parties but, as the Party in Government, we took the biggest hit. My own view is that trust will only be restored with a General Election.

The Party has taken a terrible hammering and the by-election in Norwich North was, perhaps, a taste of things to come. Ian Gibson's seat was regarded as fairly safe for Labour and was number 162 on the Conservative target list. To lose such a seat – after the terrible drubbing in the European and Local Elections in June – underlines the challenge we face.

However, all is not lost. It is easy to forget how deeply John Major's Government was hated and he lost a string of by-elections before unexpectedly winning the 1992 Election. He threatened his Party to back him or sack him and referred to members of his own Cabinet as bastards!

At Westminster there have been some highs and lows. I was hugely relieved to get my amendments supported by the Government to outlaw multi-millionaire tax exiles from bank-rolling political parties. The down side is that the Government did not act on this a long time ago and the new measures, which have to be consulted upon by the Electoral Commission, will not be in place for the General Election. It is astonishing that the Government frittered away the opportunity to tighten up the law on this and that it had to be left to me!

NO WAY TO RUN A RAILWAY

We have also seen the collapse of the East Coast Main Line franchise, with National Express likely to default on their franchise payments to the Treasury when the next payment becomes due. The Government has indicated that the franchise will be taken back into public ownership and then, in 12 months time, a new private sector operator would be sought. This, as the Transport Select Committee says, would be a huge mistake. The ECML should be retained in public ownership for say, 15 years as a public sector comparator, against which private train operating companies can be judged.

In mid month, the Secretary of State for Health, Andy Burnham, made an important statement on the future of care and support. The proposals which set out in a new Green Paper "Shaping the Future of Care Together" which is open for consultation until, I think, October. I had a useful meeting with Tony Pounder, Head of Commissioning, who is responsible for the provision of care services in East Lancashire. The idea is to make it easier for people to access the type of care that they feel best suits their condition.

AFGHANISTAN

The death and terrible maiming of so many British soldiers in Afghanistan have cast a long shadow. Operation Panther's Claw is, we are told, a success, but it was bought at a very high price. How we can bring a country steeped in corruption and

warlordism into the 21st century is \$64,000 question. There are elections coming up on 20 August, but many people question what difference the election will make.

The key, surely, must lie in education. And not just in Afghanistan but next door in Pakistan. David Miliband told me last week that despite recent economic growth, Pakistan lags far behind the rest of South Asia on all education indicators. Only 56% of children go to primary school and half the adult population is illiterate, including two thirds of women.

After a huge kerfuffle the Iraq Inquiry gets underway. It was badly mishandled right from the word go. The PM wanted it to be held in secret and that was never a runner.

Two short footnotes on Westminster. First, there has been no Government response to my Select Committee's report on Lobbying, which we published on 5 January. Why is the Government dragging its feet on this? We are calling for a mandatory register which could be part of the agenda on new openness and transparency. Then we have the Constitutional Reform Bill which ties up a few loose ends such as getting rid of hereditaries. Earlier legislation establishes a new Supreme Court which will be up and running in October. This is a very significant change in our constitutional set-up. The House of Lords will no longer be the highest Court in the land.

HEALTH MATTERS

Locally, big news on the health front has been the new Chief Executive of East Lancashire Hospitals NHS Trust. Marie Burnham has gone off to be in charge of the Swine Flu Pandemic in the North West. The new, interim, Chief Executive, Diane Whittingham, will continue to run Calderdale and Huddersfield Hospitals, juggling both jobs no doubt as best she can. As usual, the Lancashire LINk supposedly the patients' watchdog, was silent. We need a system which gives patients a voice.

The Primary Care Trust is also in the news, given its decision to put back firm decisions on the proposed new Health Centre in Colne. I have also asked the PCT to respond publicly to stories in the press about the inadequacies of NHS dentistry in East Lancashire. In fact, we have many more NHS dentists per 100,000 population than England as a whole, or indeed, the north west region.

ROLLS ROYCE

On the manufacturing front. Rolls Royce confirmed it would start manufacturing wide core fan blades in Singapore. This is a terrible decision so far as I am concerned, but has, in some measure, been offset by additional investment here in the UK. I also learned today that the RAF is to get 160 Euro Fighter Typhoons rather than 232 (at £60 million apiece) and that the future of the Joint Strike Fighter is still undecided. This will obviously have implications for RR.

It was with great sadness that we learned of the death of our old comrade Ken Spence. Everyone liked Ken, as became abundantly clear to those of us listening to the tribute from the Rev. Andrew Turner speaking to a packed congregation at Christ Church here in Carr Road. Ken lived life to the full. It was a life to celebrate.

GORDON PRENTICE MP

31.7.09

Report to Pendle GC: Friday 26 June 2009

I am tapping this out on the train from London to Leeds, reflecting on a turbulent month, quite unlike any in recent memory.

This morning's front pages are reporting the tragic death of Michael Jackson at the age of 50. The first time in ages that the press is not leading on a political story.

The expenses scandal has dominated the news for weeks and is only now beginning to blow itself out as a story. (That said, there may well be more revelations.)

Next week we shall have three days to debate and vote on the Parliamentary Standards Authority Bill which will hand over all responsibility for allowances and expenses to this independent body. It will become a criminal offence to fiddle expenses. We shall, I hope, be giving up completely the right to vote on and set our own salaries. The changes will have important implications for the 1689 Bill of Rights and the relationship between the Courts and Parliament.

GOVERNMENT CHANGES

Next door in Burnley, Kitty Ussher is standing down at the next election. She told me she has found it very difficult to juggle the work of an MP with her responsibilities to her young family. We learn that Greg Pope over in Hyndburn is also not seeking re-election.

Elsewhere, many Ministers have left the Government. Hazel Blears, Geoff Hoon, James Purnell, Caroline Flint and, perhaps, others. I have lost count. But the Prime Minister is still there, holding the fort and shoring up the defences as best he can.

The recent elections were dire, although in Pendle we more than held our own with George and Iqbal being successful. However, we lost control of Lancashire and, indeed, all the remaining Labour County Councils and we plumb new depths in the European Elections getting just 16% of the vote. We also have the ignominy of being represented in the European Parliament by the Leader of the BNP.

A NEW SPEAKER

Elsewhere, in the House of Commons there has been a changing of the guard with the little lamented Speaker Martin standing down, the first Speaker in over 300 years to be forced out of office. I was not prepared to vote for a third Labour Speaker in a row and plumped for Alan Beith and then Sir George Young.

(When I was breaking new ground by organising hustings for the Speaker candidates in October 2000, I wrote to Margaret Beckett, then Leader of the House. She told me she did not approve of the hustings and it was wrong to ask candidates to put forward their own manifestos and take questions! I could have wrecked her bid to become Speaker by releasing that letter! It stayed in my file.)

I can live with John Bercow as Speaker. He is certainly going to be much more interventionist than Michael Martin whose constant refrain was that, whatever the issue of contention, "it is not a matter for the Chair". Thank goodness Martin has gone. He didn't improve over the years. He was completely out of his depth.

One of the big issues of the day concerns the balance of power between the Government of the day and Parliament. Clearly, the Government should have time to get its legislation through the House but that doesn't mean it should control the business of the Commons, the appointments to Select Committees, the progress of Private Members' Bills and much else besides. At long last, we shall see changes.

THE IRAQ INQUIRY

This unbalanced relationship was thrown into sharp relief by the way in which The Government has sought to shape the Inquiry into the Iraq War. This was supposed to be part of the Brown relaunch and it has blown up spectacularly in his face as he alone sought to determine the scope and terms of reference of the Inquiry, its membership and detailed way of working. It was going to sit in private. But following the furore, that has changed (at least in part). There was to be no military input. Now there is to be a military "assessor". The whole exercise was completely botched.

On a brighter note, my Ashcroft amendments to close the loophole which allows tax exiles to bankroll UK political parties was carried in the Lords. As you know, I asked Dale Campbell Savours to table the amendments I put to the Commons but were not reached.

ASHCROFT

In a historic vote, more Labour peers voted for Dale's amendments than voted for the Government and the Bill as amended will have to return to the Commons where MPs, at last, will have their say. The Government has not, as yet, conceded the point but I cannot for the life of me believe Jack Straw will ask Labour MPs to join the Conservatives to reverse the Lords' decision. More likely is procedural fancy footwork of the type in which Jack excels. He is a Oscar winning performer.

Next week, we have a work experience student at Carr Road and I shall be setting him various tasks other than making the tea and opening the mail. Writing press releases on local issues; drafting a brief on the case for the reopening of the Colne – Skipton railway for the ministerial meeting on 7 July are just a few of the things to keep him busy!

At Westminster, not a lot is happening on the legislative front. We have many days which are unwhipped. It is as if the expenses thing has squeezed the life out of the place. My Select Committee is a welcome place of activity where we are conducting inquiries into Executive Pay in the Public Sector; Leaks and Whistleblowing; the 2011 Census; and the appointment of GOATS. (People appointed to the peerage and then given Ministerial posts. We may well ask the pantomime act, Sir Alan Sugar, to appear before us.

The Postal Services Bill, part privatising the Royal Mail, completed its stages in the Lords on 20 May but there is still no date for its arrival in the Commons. The only private sector "partner" still in the frame is a private equity outfit. The Dutch postal services operator, TNT, and the German post office have pulled out.

GORDON PRENTICE MP

Friday 26 June 2009

REPORT TO GC MARCH 2009

For the past few weeks, Prime Minister's Questions have been very restrained following the tragic death of David Cameron's six year old son, Ivan. However, the old Punch and Judy show came bursting back to life on Wednesday. The story continues to be the Economy, stupid. Unemployment reached the two million mark this month and, here in Pendle, it is rising by about 100 per month.

I had an useful meeting with Steve Johnson from the Jobcentre Plus over in Blackburn (who is responsible for the East Lancashire area) and he told me they were recruiting people in anticipation of the continuing rise in unemployment. We must hope that the policy initiatives taken by the Government will work through into the real economy and mitigate the effects of the recession.

It is very heartening to hear the change of tone in Government statements on tax havens and so on and I hope we will be bolder when it comes to taxation generally. I see that the Conservatives are now committing themselves to a new top rate of tax at 45p for those earning over £150,000. We promised something similar months ago, in a timid way.

Despite some encouraging signs from the Government, old habits die hard, with the Government urging MPs to vote against Lindsay Hoyle's Redundancy Payments Bill. "Postman Pat" McFadden spoke for about two and a half hours last Friday in an blatant attempt to talk the Bill out, but he dried up and we got a vote after all. Labour MPs who ordinarily would have followed the Government line were too embarrassed to vote as instructed, with the Deputy Chief Whip, John Speller going into the No Lobby with the Conservatives and the rest of us supporting Lindsay in the Aye Lobby. Lindsay's Bill now goes into Committee.

At last month's GC, I boastfully drew attention to the huge support I was getting for my amendments to the Political Parties and Elections Bill to stop tax exiles from bankrolling political parties, predicting that it would be debated and voted on. However, despite the support of 216 MPs, procedural fancy footwork meant that my amendment was never moved and it fell. Fortunately, I have had a word with my friend Lord (Dale) Campbell-Savours, who will re-table my amendments as his own in the Lords. The Bill also brings in individual voter registration, but this will not be mandatory until 2015.

On the legislation front, the Postal Services Bill is now in the House of Lords with the Government strategy to play it long. However, opposition to the part privatisation is as strong now as ever and, indeed, is growing.

We also had controversial votes on the Welfare Reform Bill which paves the way for the future abolition of Income Support and a new "work for your benefits" regime. Many of the ideas in the Bill were the brainchild of a certain David Freud, who was plucked from relative obscurity by the Prime Minister to contribute to a long term review of the Government's Welfare to Work strategy. He has now joined the Conservatives and will be made a Minister in the Lords, leading on this issue for the Opposition. You really couldn't make it up. The Bill includes a number of controversial measures, such as farming out work currently done by Jobcentre Plus to

the private and voluntary sectors. Work done by civil servants will soon be work done by private sector employees – a bit like what happened to the DWP File Store in Nelson when work was contracted out to Capita in 2004. The Bill proposes that lone parents (overwhelmingly women) will be expected to participate in “work related activity” when the child is 3. In my view, this is way too young, with even the Conservatives proposing 5. I voted against the Government on this, along with many of my colleagues. On a more positive note, blind people are going to get the Higher Rate Mobility Component of Disability Living Allowance (DLA). This is surely something to celebrate and costs a paltry £40 million. Small change these days.

I also had an opportunity earlier this month to speak in Ann Cryer's Adjournment Debate on the Financial Services Compensation Scheme. This scheme levies banks and other financial organisations such as building societies, with the fund being used to protect customers should the institutions go belly up. I had a word with Neil Shoesmith from the Marsden and he told me the levy was crucifying the Building Society sector, whose prudence is a million miles away from the swashbuckling profligacy of the banks.

I have also renewed my call for Fred Goodwin to be stripped of his Knighthood and action to be taken on his pension.

On the Select Committee front, we are concluding a fascinating inquiry into leaks and whistle blowing. Civil Servants sign the Official Secrets Act and breaching it can mean a prison sentence. So when people resign their jobs or send brown paper envelopes to journalists, it is important that we understand their motivation. We heard from a Senior Diplomat yesterday who resigned from the Foreign Office in 2004, I think, believing that Britain could have done more to stop the illegal sale of Iraqi oil to countries such as Jordan and Turkey. The £2 billion from this kept Saddam's regime afloat. I want to see an enquiry into what really happened in the run-up to war in Iraq (I also predict that Tony Blair's memoirs will be a long time in coming).

A small triumph. A year after Matthew Brough and his Effective Car Park Management Company used strong arm tactics to extort money from unsuspecting people who parked on the Lomeshay Industrial Village, things are moving. The Transport Minister, Jim Fitzpatrick, tells me that the loophole that allowed Brough to get personal details of motorists from the DVLA is to be closed. This is very good news.

Locally, I have been out and about. Earlier today I spoke to students at Nelson & Colne College and then had an interview on nutrition and health for students from Fisher More. This is a project for the BBC and they hope the interview will be broadcast. I keep my fingers crossed. I also supported the Palestinian event a couple of weeks ago in Brierfield, where a couple of women from the West Bank recounted their experiences.

GORDON PRENTICE MP
20.3.09.

REPORT TO GC JANUARY 2009

It has been a radioactive start to the New Year. The revelations in the Sunday Times that four Labour Peers allegedly were prepared to take money to influence legislation will, if true, do us immense damage. The idea that Lord Taylor of Blackburn thinks he is worth £120,000 is risible. And despite his protestations of innocence, the material that is already in the public domain is hugely damaging. Assistant Commissioner Yates (of the Yard) who led the "cash for honours" inquiry is sniffing around and there may well be a police investigation.

I believe the time has come for a mandatory register of lobbyists, policed by an independent body, which includes information provided by the lobbyists themselves and those being lobbied. My Select Committee, with great prescience, called for this in a report published a couple of weeks ago.

I also think the Standing Orders of the Parliamentary Labour Party need to be changed to require Labour MPs and Peers who take second jobs, to explain what is involved in terms of time commitment, the remuneration and how this employment or consultancy will advance the aims and objectives of the Labour Party. In fact, I drafted such an amendment close to a year ago, but didn't send it in for fear that it would be seen as destabilising or "anti-party".

January has also been dominated by the conflict in Gaza and the humanitarian crisis which envelopes that tiny strip of territory. Gaza is twice the size of Pendle, but has seventeen times the population. The Israelis sealed the borders and the last functioning airport was bombed in 2000 and is now unusable. The majority of the population are totally reliant on food aid and in the wake of the destruction caused by the Israeli assault food, medicine and other supplies are urgently needed.

Israel should talk to Hamas, with no pre-conditions save one. There should be an immediate end to violence. There can only be peace in the Middle East if a viable Palestinian State is created alongside Israel which goes back to its 1967 borders. This means an end to settlements on occupied Palestinian territory and the removal of the illegal wall in the West Bank. I explained my thinking at a meeting last Friday at the Mosque down by Morrisons.

Here, the slide into recession continues with a steady roll-call of jobs being lost or part time working being introduced. Despite claims by the Conservatives to the contrary, this is not a home made recession triggered by soaring inflation or sky high interest rates. We are entering a global slump and the British Government, like others elsewhere, is trying to work its way through it.

We need much tougher regulation of the City and an end to the lionising of the "masters of the universe". The former Chief Executive of the Royal Bank of Scotland, Sir Fred Goodwin, was knighted in 2004 for services to banking. Given that he had presided over the biggest corporate loss in British commercial history, I think the gong should be returned. Back to plain old Fred I think.

We have also had to listen to lectures from Lord Digby Jones who served as a Ministerial GOAT with the Trade portfolio in a "Government of all the talents" He

*Conrad
Harris
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never joined the Labour Party and absented himself on foreign trips when there was legislation coming up with which he disagreed. What a joke! People like Digby Jones should not be brought into a Labour Government. When will we ever learn?

As you know, the Government is proposing to part privatise the Royal Mail, bringing in a private sector partner such as TNT. Peter Mandelson has promised full consultation but I want the Government to have a rethink. There should be no question of legislation being introduced and carried through on Conservative and Lib Dem votes.

On a more positive note, we learned of the new policy to build a network of high speed rail lines across the country. Lord Adonis, the Railways Minister, told me this week that the web names HS2 to HS10 have already been taken by the Government, but building the lines will clearly take a lot longer. But it is a very positive and welcome policy commitment which follows a similar one given earlier by the Conservatives.

Locally, I gave oral evidence (if that doesn't sound too grand) to the Lancashire Overview and Scrutiny Committee which Tim chairs. I told the Committee, meeting at Blackburn Hospital, that the Meeting Patients Needs programme should be reviewed and validated or not by the Independent Reconfiguration Panel. I know that an in-house review will persuade no one that things are better, given the recent photos of ambulances queuing up outside Blackburn's A&E Department. I also believe Burnley General should have its blue light A&E reinstated with a published protocol indicating the hospitals ambulances would go to according to the injury or condition of the patient they were carrying.

On Wednesday, I joined the Lancashire Further Education principals for dinner at Westminster to discuss the challenges facing the sector. Lin Surgeon from Nelson & Colne was also there. Colleges have to fund their own capital programmes. Schools don't. There is a pay gap between schoolteachers and college lecturers and other concerns where colleges apparently get the rough end of the stick.

The Political Parties and Elections Bill is coming back to the floor of the House of Commons on Monday 9 February. It makes proposals for the reform of the Electoral Commission and on the way donations are made to political parties. But, astonishingly, it does not close the Ashcroft loophole. I have, therefore, tabled an amendment to outlaw British citizens who are not UK residents for tax purposes from giving money to a political party. And people who do donate will have to sign a declaration that they are UK residents for tax purposes. This will probably catch Ashcroft. I am pressing the Government to support my amendment.

I see that Nick Clegg wants Britain to join the Euro asap. I hope the Lib Dem leaning Nelson Leader picked up on that, given their "save the pound" stance. Baron Greaves continues to amuse. He is now banging the drum for the reinstatement of the Colne-Skipton line which, a few years ago, he ridiculed as "a non starter".

GORDON PRENTICE MP
30.1.09

REPORT TO GC 28 NOVEMBER 2008

November has been a momentous month, punctuated by some truly historic events. On the first Tuesday we had the election of Barack Obama, who will, by his very presence in the White House, change the way the world looks at America. The Conservatives here talked up Obama's victory saying it confirmed their view that people want change. However, we do not forget that the Conservatives invited John McCain to their Party Conference and were rooting for him. What hypocrites they are! In contrast, we all have high hopes for the Obama Presidency.

As usual, I attended the Remembrance ceremonies in Barrowford, Nelson and Barnoldswick which were held in truly appalling weather. On the following Tuesday on the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month, the nation paid tribute to three surviving old soldiers, aged 108, 110, 112, at the Cenotaph in Whitehall. It was the 90th Anniversary of the end of the First World War and a very moving occasion.

At Westminster, all eyes were focussed on the Pre Budget Report which makes astonishing reading. The Government forecasts the country will stay in recession next year and come out of it in 2010. And we all hope this is so. In the meantime, it is likely that unemployment will rise and some businesses will fold. The end of Woolworths and MFI illustrates what may happen over coming months.

In an effort to keep the recession as short and shallow as possible the Government is putting money into people's pockets so they can continue to spend. Everyone knows about the two and a half percent cut in VAT and what is not passed on to the consumer in lower prices will be retained by businesses and, no doubt, used to offset their costs. The increase in the personal allowance for 22 million basic rate tax payers, which was introduced following the 10p tax rate cock-up, is now to be made permanent. Child Benefit increases to £20 for the first child are to be brought forward from April to January and in that month pensioners will get a payment of £60.

I welcome the first nervous and tentative steps towards more a progressive system of income tax. The Personal Allowance will be restricted for those with incomes over £100,000 (the 2% of people with the highest incomes) and there will be a new higher rate of income tax of 45% for those with incomes above £150,000. This is scheduled to come in, after the next Election, in April 2011.

I could hardly believe my ears when I heard Ken Clarke tell the Commons on Wednesday during the debate on the Pre Budge Report that Geoffrey Howe's 1981 Budget was a winner. As you know, the country was facing a deep recession and Howe increased taxes and cut public spending and Ken Clarke told us "it was successful". Whole swathes of manufacturing industry were wiped out and only the Falklands saved Thatcher.

The other truly earth shattering event is unfolding even as I speak. The terrible carnage and brutality we are seeing in Mumbai is beyond my understanding. It is not yet clear who is behind the attack or what the motivation is, but all will become clear no doubt within the next 24 hours. By a strange twist of fate, our old friend Sajjad Karim MEP found himself in the lobby of the Taj Mahal Hotel when one of the gunmen started firing. It must have been traumatising to witness such slaughter.

At Westminster, we have tied up all the loose ends and Parliament is now prorogued until this coming Wednesday, when we will start the new Session with the State Opening with all its pomp and ceremony. The legislative agenda has been already published, although I suspect there will be one or two new Bills to reflect the current realities. I think there will be something on Credit Unions and I am hopeful the Government will do even more to promote mutual organisations.

I read in the papers today that there may be moves to force offenders who are out working in the community as part of the “Community Pay Back” scheme, to wear fluorescent jackets advertising that fact. Sometimes I despair! Why do we go for the populist options and seek to humiliate people? On the brighter side, we had a very welcome Government decision to retain the Post Office Card Account with the contract staying with the Post Office. This was, as they say, a “no-brainer”. A decision to give POCA to Paypoint would have meant the further closure of thousands of post offices. (You should also know that the Union of Communication Workers has decided financially my election campaign.)

On my Select Committee, we are continuing our inquiry into Equitable Life. It points to the need for tighter regulation all round. Whether the Government decides to compensate those who lost out is another matter. It is already shelling out billions of pounds it had previously no plans to do. (I bank with the NatWest which is part of the Bank of Scotland Group, which is now 57% owned by the tax payers!) The Conservatives accuse us of incredible profligacy, but the Americans are pumping over \$700 billion into their economy as a rescue package and France and Germany have announced rescue packages 860 billion euros.

Locally, I have been out and about. Earlier this month, I spoke to students at Nelson & Colne College who are on the Public Services course. I also had an opportunity to speak about education issues with the new Principal of the College, Lyn Surgeon. And a few days ago I had the opportunity of raising the whole question of Education Maintenance Allowances in a debate at Westminster. The behaviour of Liberata here in Pendle was truly shocking. The company has now lost the contract which has gone back to Capita (who held it before) but, amazingly, no penalties are to be paid by the company for screwing up so comprehensively. Indeed, the tax payer is giving Liberata £4 million to compensate it for the IT equipment and systems which are to be transferred to Capita. You really couldn't make it up.

I think we were all shocked to find out earlier this month that there is a very sizeable nest of BNP members here in Pendle. With 77, we have one of the highest constituency memberships in the country, including one or two who are known to me.

Last Friday, I called a meeting of Whitefield residents at the Community Hall on Leeds Road. Nothing prepared me for what followed. A ranting Sonia Robinson, whose default position is “angry” and his Lordship, Tony Greaves and Council Leader John David, had gatecrashed my meeting! I am determined that we get things moving on Whitefield and we do not allow the Lib Dems to inflict further endless meetings on residents who are already punch-drunk.

GORDON PRENTICE MP

REPORT TO GC OCTOBER 2008

The past month has been quite unprecedented with the global financial crisis dominating everything and changing the “terms of trade” between us and the Conservatives. The Prime Minister, who typically has looked crushed by the burdens of office, has a new spring in his step and is confident at the Despatch Box. This is good and exactly how it should be!

The Conservatives try to sell the line that the coming recession is uniquely the responsibility of the Labour Government, when everyone who reads a newspaper or watches television knows that the phenomenon is global. Iceland is pretty much bankrupt and Ireland, once the Celtic tiger, is moving into recession. Across the globe from South Korea to Argentina stock markets are falling. The question for us (politically) is whether people blame the Government or rather global forces, when unemployment rises and businesses go under.

A huge slab of the financial sector is now indirectly controlled by the Government and I welcome the steps that are now being taken to help people who may face difficulties with mortgage costs. It must always be possible to extend the life of a mortgage and so reduce repayments, rather than repossess.

Into this maelstrom steps Lord Peter “I’m intensely relaxed about people getting filthy rich” Mandelson, who, astonishingly, is back for the third time as Secretary of State for Business and Enterprise. The future of the Post Office is, unfortunately, in his hands. I do not want to see the Post Office privatised in whole or in part and I want to see the Government continue with the Post Office Card Account, with the contract going to the Post Office and not a private sector competitor such as Pay Point.

Politics is a funny old world indeed. It is no secret that Brown and Mandelson hated each others guts until a few weeks ago when an unlikely marriage of convenience brought them together. We are told by none other than the Shadow Chancellor, George Osborne, that Mandelson was “dripping poison” about Brown when the two of them got together for dinner in a taverna in Corfu in August. What happened next is stranger than fiction. Osborne fed the press juicy details of what Mandelson had said and broke the iron law of the super rich - you don’t talk about what was said at gatherings of the world’s richest and most influential people, especially when the host is Nat Rothschild.

The financial crisis has given the Prime Minister an opportunity. People are watching him and listening to him and he must capitalise on this and respond to people’s concerns. For example, the Labour Conference carried a motion on a windfall tax and this has been referred to the National Policy Forum in the usual way (ie it will sink without trace). He should read the riot act to the utility companies and take action to protect people against spiralling utility bills at a time when their incomes are likely to be squeezed. He should take firm action against loan sharks who devour the most stretched financially without a moment’s thought. I received a leaflet through my door saying I could borrow £300 if I paid back £504 twelve months later. What a rip-off.

The yawning gap between the super-rich and ordinary mortals has been investigated by Polly Toynbee and David Walker in their new book "Unjust Rewards". If ever there was a time to introduce a more progressive system of taxation, this is it. We wait to see what the Chancellor says in the Autumn Statement next month. For example, although 22 million people benefited from the 10p tax debacle, 1 million people have still to be fully compensated. That is something that will have to be addressed next month.

The signs are that Brown is listening. The BBC carried an important story today about women being given a "pensions boost". A new amendment to the Pensions Bill will be brought in next week to allow women who don't have a full contributions record, to buy additional years. At the moment 90% of men, but only 35% of women qualify for the full State Pension. Many women typically give up work to care for children or the elderly and make insufficient national insurance payments.

Next month promises to be fascinating. On 4 November we have the US Presidential Election, where the pundits say that Obama is cruising to an easy victory. He has outspent and outgunned McCain and certainly deserves to win.

Here at home, we have the Glenrothes by-election on 6 November and, by all accounts, we have a strong candidate. The PM has said he will campaign there (his constituency is next door) and I keep my fingers crossed we can see off an SNP challenge. The hammer blow on the Scottish banking sector hopefully will be blamed on global forces and not on Brown. We also face a Civil Service strike on 10 November, which will hit Jobcentres, courts, prisons and tax offices. It's not just about pay, but about out-sourcing as well.

At Westminster, the Political Parties Bill was introduced last week which will close the Ashcroft loophole. It remains to be seen whether the legislation will bite immediately or whether the Electoral Commission will dance around the subject and delay giving advice and guidance. As I write this, I see that another eight page tabloid has gone out from the Conservatives to every household in the constituency. My own Parliamentary Report has now gone out and I hope it is well received. It is three weeks between writing the copy and distribution, so it's a real challenge to make it topical. The stories are developed in my new website, which is easier on the eye than the old one.

Locally, I have been out and about. I am meeting Colne doctors next Friday to talk about the new Health Centre and I shall be speaking to Whitefield residents in November. I shall also be talking to Nelson & Colne College Students on public service issues. Last week, I met staff at the local Probation Office in Nelson and heard about the work they are doing and the challenges they face. I have also been setting up meetings at Westminster for colleagues with an interest in Rolls Royce. As you know, the Company will decide in January whether to start manufacturing fan blades in the Far East. We don't want that.

You should know, I am backing Foundation Trust Status for our local hospitals from 1 February 2009

GORDON PRENTICE MP : 24.10.08

The Labour Leadership

I am writing to all members of the Pendle CLP to let you know my views on what is happening in the Party at the moment. There is great turmoil. Some MPs are challenging the National Executive Committee, which meets tomorrow, Tuesday, to send out the nomination papers for Leader of the Party. These used to be sent out routinely to MPs until the practice was stopped about a decade ago. The rule, however, still lives on in the rule book.

I am quoted, incorrectly, in a series of newspapers as being part of this group of MPs who broke cover a few days ago to call for a contest for Leader.

In fact, as you know, I set out my position publicly on 28 July this year. I told the General Committee on 25 July that I did not believe Labour could win the next election with Gordon Brown as Leader. My remarks came after the loss of Glasgow East - our third safest seat in Scotland - to the SNP on 24 July. That defeat followed earlier ones in Crewe and Nantwich and Henley where we came in fifth, trailing the BNP. We had also lost the London Mayoral election and had been hammered in the local elections. Pendle's results, where we took seats from our opponents, went against the trend.

I think many people in the Party are unhappy with Brown's leadership because he won it in an uncontested election. I was one of a handful of Labour MPs who pressed for a contested election precisely because I didn't really know the man - even after all these years as Pendle's MP - and I wanted to know how his approach would differ from his predecessor in policy areas that were important to me. However, an election, once triggered, would introduce huge new uncertainties. The wider Party would be involved, not just the MPs, and the outcome less certain.

The number of MPs needed to trigger a contest where there is a vacancy (40) is set way too high and is an almost insurmountable barrier to get over. And to challenge a sitting Leader takes a Soviet style 70. Even when Brown had enough nominations comfortably to get on the ballot paper, his team were still arm twisting colleagues to nominate him, to reduce the pool of undeclared MPs and make it close to impossible to get to the 40 threshold. In the end, 313 MPs nominated Brown in May 2007.

I believe our present problems are a direct result of the rusting up of the Party's internal democracy over the past decade. The furore over the nomination papers is one example but there are others.

In one of his first actions as Leader, Brown insisted there should be no votes on contemporary, or topical, resolutions at Annual Conference. Instead these were to be referred to the widely discredited National Policy Forum without a vote. This year we could see a debate but, incredibly, no vote on, say, proposals for a Windfall Tax. It would disappear into the black hole of the NPF.

We have this elaborate architecture of policy making which does not reflect the reality of what Members on the ground feel about things. How is it possible, for example, for the hugely damaging Post Office closure programme to go through when every person I spoke to here in Pendle and at Westminster told me it was disastrous.

And how on earth was it possible for the party to embrace the new generation of Trident? A phoney and manipulated Party consultation took place but no vote was allowed at Conference, even though Labour MPs would be voting on the issue a few months later.

And how can it be that the gap between the richest and poorest in Britain is widening, under a Labour Government? How did we ever allow the 10p debacle to happen? A motion was in front of last year's conference but, predictably, was ruled out of order.

Our policy making procedures have become so opaque and the leadership so dominant, no-one really knows any more how to influence and shape our policies. In a political party people need to know where the policy making levers are - and what happens when you pull them.

The Parliamentary Labour Party has also been marginalised. When I was first elected to Parliament there were regular topical debates at the PLP and votes. Now it is a wholly orchestrated affair - a presentation from a Cabinet Minister and certainly no votes. These would be "destabilising".

The procedures of the PLP stand in stark contrast to those of political parties in sister democracies such as Canada where the views of the Party Caucus (the MPs meeting in private) carry real weight.

When we are in opposition, Labour MPs vote annually for our Parliamentary leadership. When in Office, every member of the Cabinet (indeed, every member of the Government) is there as a result of Prime Ministerial patronage. The last time I voted for our leadership in parliament was in 1996. The result is a concentration of power focussed on the Leader with few checks and balances.

Even if Brown gets through the Manchester Conference unscathed, he still faces problems at Westminster. What is he going to do about 42 days detention without charge when his proposals come back to the Commons having been rejected by the Lords? Brown made this a totemic issue yet had to rely on the DUP last time to win in the Commons. Can he simply brush off a Commons defeat when he has made such a big thing of this issue?

And what about the upcoming Glenrothes by election? It is next door to his own constituency. Is he going to give it a wide berth, as he did Glasgow East (on the grounds PMs don't get involved in by elections) or is he going to campaign?

I believe elections confer legitimacy. After manoeuvring successfully to get rid of Blair, Brown made a fatal misjudgement in working so hard to ensure there would be an uncontested election. If ever there was a Pyrrhic victory, this was it.

I believe we cannot win with Brown as Leader. I would like to see a new Leader by Christmas - after a contested election.

Gordon Prentice MP
15 September 2008

REPORT TO GC SEPTEMBER 2008

I never thought in a thousand years that I would be telling the Pendle GC that global capitalism is close to meltdown, with the US Government bringing key financial institutions into public ownership. But there we are, it has happened. Forget Northern Rock, the equivalent would be the British Government taking over the Halifax, Nationwide and so on and holding the mortgages of half the home owners in the country. What has been happening in the financial sector is unprecedented in living memory. You have to go back to the 1930s to see anything comparable.

The collapse of confidence in Wall Street has had huge implications, not least for our Prime Minister. It has, in my view, given him a new lease of life and for the time being he has been able to put the resignations and public criticism of his performance behind him. In the run up to the Conference, we saw a number of MPs, previously ultra loyal, tear into the Prime Minister. My criticism of Gordon Brown back in July, was that he was pursuing a policy agenda which would lead us to a complete wipe-out at the next General Election. To the extent that recent events have forced him to change tack, I welcome that.

At the Conference, the core of his message was "fairness" and I applaud that. But having stated the objective, clearly we must follow through. It is difficult to talk about fairness when we have a public sector pay limit of around two and half percent while private sector pay has been allowed to rip. Even now, we shy away from bringing in a new top rate of tax for the wealthy, in case it frightens the horses. How can it be right for the city financier on £200,000 to pay the same top rate of tax as a senior teacher on £36,000? And the police probably do not think it was fair for their arbitrated pay award to be rejected and a new one substituted by the Government. Into the mix we add the terrible blunder of the abolition of the 10p tax rate – which Brown carried through in full knowledge of the consequences – but for which he now, thankfully, acknowledges his mistake.

The psephologists and the pollsters tell us that no Party this far behind in the polls has a hope of clawing its way back to win an election. I don't know if that is true, but I do know we need a fresh, new policy agenda which puts us on the side of ordinary working people. I heard Neil Kinnock on the BBC a few days ago ridiculing the notion of a windfall tax or higher tax bands, as a Leftist (my word) "pot of gold" demand. On the contrary, these are realistic and legitimate demands.

I think the story has still to be played out and I suspect we shall have a Cabinet reshuffle next month, triggered, if not forced, by the bizarre announcement at 3am of Ruth Kelly's resignation. And we shall see how my colleagues rub along together when we return to Westminster on 6 October, after so much has been said.

We have important votes coming up on the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill, which was postponed because of the Glasgow East by-election (for fear of alienating the large Catholic community there) and the simmering issue of 42 days detention without charge.

We also face the prospect of a by-election at Glenrothes, possibly on 6 November – two days after the American Presidential Election, which will help blot out any bad news. I am sure the SNP will be campaigning vigorously on the light touch, or possibly soft touch, regulation of the City which allowed a 300 year old institution,

the Bank of Scotland, to go down the pan overnight, snapped up by Lloyds TSB for 10% of its value a year ago.

We have the Conservative Conference next week and they will be under pressure to flesh out their agenda, given that so many people believe they will be forming the next Government in 18 months time. The Liberal Democrats, for their part, have changed tack on tax and are led by a man who does not do his homework. When asked about the level of the State Pension, he got it spectacularly wrong, saying it was "about thirty quid" when, in reality, it is more than three times that. They have also got their fingers burned by cold calling. They should have learned from John Prescott when he tried this at the last Election – it bombed.

Locally, I have been out and about. I recently met the new Principal of Nelson & Colne College, Lynn Surgeon, and I had an interesting presentation from the Managing Director of Burnley & Pendle Buses on their plans for local transport. We also had a good discussion about the very popular (but under-funded) concessionary travel scheme for the over 60s. UNISON has also approached me about the transfer of NHS staff employed by the Primary Care Trust into the private sector and this is something I am following up. I also met the local Age Concern people to talk about the Government's proposals to reform social care. And I had a very useful briefing today from the Council's Energy Efficiency person, Heather Shaw. With energy prices spiralling, we need to do all we can to publicise initiatives such as Warm Front, which has been a big success. Over eight years 7,840 households here in Pendle have been helped with heating and insulation grants.

I am visiting Rolls Royce in Barnoldswick on Tuesday to meet the company Vice President, Richard Harcourt, along with the Union, to discuss the possible expansion of the plant there, which will run out of capacity in 2011. The company is actively considering a new fan blade manufacturing facility in Singapore and wants Government cash to persuade it to invest in the UK. I am pressing the Rolls Royce case with Ministers. The good news is that on Monday the company will be announcing 90 plus new jobs in Barnoldswick.

At the office in Carr Road we have all been busily working on the first of my Parliamentary Reports which will be going out regularly to all 38,000 households in Pendle. I am also commissioning a completely new website. We are up against a Conservative operation funded by a tax exile living in Belize. And even with legislation to control this, which Jack Straw has promised to bring in in the new Session, I fear it will be too late to stop the flood of Tory tabloid newsletters.

Many people have written the Labour Government off and give us 18 months and no more. If this is indeed the case, then let us do now what people expect a Labour Government to do: regulate the City, crack down on abuses, bring in a progressive tax system and make a reality of the fairness agenda that Gordon Brown mentioned on Tuesday.

GORDON PRENTICE MP
26.9.08

REPORT TO GC JULY 2008

I woke up at 3.50am this morning curious to find out the result of the Glasgow East by-election. The result was as bad as it gets, with Labour losing its third safest seat in Scotland and twenty-fifth safest in the UK. This result comes on the back of the loss of Crewe and Nantwich to the Conservatives and the London Mayor election to the buffoon Boris Johnson. And, of course, we came in fifth behind the BNP at Henley. That was a very unwelcome first.

As you know, the Policy Forum is meeting in Warwick over the weekend and the Prime Minister is urging us all to hold our nerve. However, the Leader of the GMB, Paul Kenny, is already calling for a Leadership election in the autumn. Others will, no doubt, urge us to rally round the leader in the hope we can retrieve things by May/June 2010. Roy Hattersley falls into this latter category, writing in the Guardian yesterday he said it was still possible to win a fourth term by supporting Brown and an explicitly Social Democratic agenda. Speaking for myself, I do not believe it is possible to win the next election with Brown as Prime Minister.

The Party Conference in Manchester in September could be important, although there will, of course, be no votes on contemporary motions as these are no longer in order, but are referred to the Policy Forum for discussion. We should remind ourselves that the debacle over the 10p tax rate could perhaps have been avoided or addressed at an earlier stage had last year's Conference been allowed to debate the resolutions that had been tabled on the issue.

DETENTION WITHOUT CHARGE

When Parliament returns in October we shall be confronted with the 42 day detention issue which comes back to us from the House of Lords. You will recall the Commons approved detention without charge for 42 days after the most incredible arm twisting had been applied to those susceptible to such pressure. Inducements were offered to others such as the nine DUP MPs. The Government majority was nine!

I had a one to one session with the Prime Minister in Downing Street, where he tried to persuade me to support 42 days. Why 42 days? Why not 420 days? I held my ground. It is impossible to imagine the Commons overturning a Lords' amendment to strike out 42 days. So, in October, we shall be back where we started.

We shall also be returning to the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill in October. It should have been dealt with this month, but Commons business was re-scheduled with an eye on the Glasgow by-election.

ROAD SAFETY

I had an opportunity to raise the whole issue of road safety and young drivers in an Adjournment Debate last week. A campaign has been running in the Lancashire Telegraph for over a year, urging the Government to bring in a graduated licence, where learners move in stages towards a full licence when they are deemed to be competent. The Telegraph wants restrictions on new drivers carrying passengers, driving on motorways and at night time, but this has been rejected by Ministers.

The Government's proposals are out for consultation until early September, but I suspect the die is cast and there will be no rethink. The Government is terrified of being accused of "over regulation".

NHS 60th BIRTHDAY

July has very much been the month of the NHS, with its 60th anniversary. The Government is proposing a new constitution for the NHS and a draft is out for consultation. The constitution sets out a series of rights for patients and offers avenues for complaints and redress. Alongside the constitution, we have seen a flurry of publications spawned by the Ara Darzi Review. Darzi promises an NHS responsive to the views and concerns of local people, but translating this objective into practice is likely to be less straight forward. Papers on the future of Primary Care point to closer co-operation with Council Overview and Scrutiny Committees and there is even talk of PCTs becoming "membership organisations", a bit like Foundation Trusts.

I shall be meeting the new Chief Executive of East Lancashire Hospitals NHS Trust, Marie Burnham on Monday and I shall be talking to her about Foundation status and what it will mean as well as the reconfiguration of the hospital service which has generated so much controversy over the last few years.

I had an opportunity to meet representatives of the Local Medical Committee today at Carr Road. The LMC speaks for local GPs and we ran through the issues of the moment: competence tests for GPs, out of hours working and so on. We also touched on the new Community Health facility planned for Colne.

LIB DEM DOSSIER

Yesterday the PCT formally considered its response to the Lib/Dem Health "horror stories" dossier. The report indicated that the dossier was of limited value because so many of the cases referred to were anonymised. There were 132 personal references, of which nine are formal complaints and are in the system. It seems clear to me that the transfer of blue light A&E from Burnley to Blackburn and all the associated changes did not proceed smoothly. The Hospital Trust admits that patient records were not always to hand when they should have been. We are asked to believe that things are now settling down. Indeed, the LMC told me today that they were not pressing for the return of blue light A&E to Burnley.

As I have said on many occasions, the only way out of this quagmire is to bring in people from outside, with no axe to grind, who can take a view on whether the reconfiguration is working or not. The PCT wants to bring in a Department of Health "expert team" on emergency care and service reconfiguration in about six months time.

Over the past week we have had an important Green Paper on Welfare Reform – again out for consultation! However, the Government's intentions are clear, they want (and I want) everyone who can work to be encouraged and helped into work and a raft of new measures are proposed to help people. Buried in the small print, are proposals to bring in the private and third sectors to do work which is currently carried out by civil servants in Jobcentre Plus. All over the public sector initiatives are taking place to involve the private sector ever more. The Government has no qualms any more about admitting this.

We have also had an important statement on the SATs fiasco and on forced marriages. Someone leaving the UK intending to marry would have to register that fact before leaving the country.

Last week, I met the new Chief Executive of Lancashire County Council, Ged Fitzgerald and we had a good discussion ranging over a number of fronts. He is very keen to promote and develop joint working with the borough council and with others across East Lancashire.

NUCLEAR PROLIFERATION

Finally, I noticed a Commons Motion tabled by the former Foreign Secretary, Margaret Beckett. It noted the report of the Nuclear Security Project launched in the US by Henry Kissinger, George Schultz, William Perry (former Defence Secretary to Bill Clinton) and Sam Nunn and the supportive comments by Lord Hurd, Lord Owen, Lord Robertson and others, warning against nuclear proliferation. I tabled an amendment reminding my colleagues that the Government has recently decided to squander billions to upgrade Trident and recalling the late Robin Cook and Denis Healey are on record as saying there is no military reason for having nuclear weapons.

We learned from the Guardian this week that the Government is earmarking £3 billion for a new generation of nuclear warheads.

GORDON PRENTICE MP
25.7.08

REPORT TO GC 30 JUNE 2008

I am writing this on Monday morning (30 June) after a difficult few weeks for the Government. I had intended to say “a truly terrible few weeks” but Robert urged me to be positive! Certainly the media has developed a collective hysteria about the Prime Minister suggesting that everything he touches turns to dust. Speaking for myself, I can hardly bear to read another analysis charting how things went wrong.

It is true that the Henley by-election was a new low for us. Coming in fifth behind the BNP was a humiliation we could have done without. Now we have the uncertainty of a further by election in Glasgow East, with the resignation of David Marshall for health reasons. Adding to the turmoil north of the border, the Party faces the prospect of a contested election for the Labour leadership in Scotland, following the decision of Wendy Alexander to stand down.

The Conservatives, of course, have their own problems, though no one seems to be noticing. The steady stream of sleaze stories from the Conservative Group in Brussels and other revelations closer to home, have not affected the love affair which is developing between the public and Cameron’s Conservatives. We shall see how well the former Shadow Home Secretary, David Davies, does in the Haltemprice and Howden by election on 10 July. As you know, Labour is not standing – although there are 26 candidates – so my vote goes to the Church of Elvis Party!

In the Commons, we have been through some difficult votes in the last month. The Government won the vote on 42 days by nine – the same number as the DUP Members, who voted with Brown. The Prime Minister asked me over to Downing Street for a fifteen minute tête-à-tête, but I was not persuaded. The Counter Terrorism Bill has now gone to the House of Lords where I suspect the 42 days proposal will not survive and the Bill will then return to the Commons for us to consider their amendments. As you know, the former Lord Chancellor, former Attorney General, former Lord Chief Justice and current Director of Public Prosecutions, are all against the change and few Labour MPs are wildly enthusiastic about it.

We also had a wobble on the Planning Bill which creates an Independent Planning Commission which will take final decision on major infrastructure projects such as new railway lines, reservoirs and such like. An amendment pushed by my colleague Clive Betts, gives Ministers the final say on the siting of nuclear power stations and airports and the whole matter is to be reviewed in two years. That was the deal. We are in the weird and wonderful position, thanks to this legislation, of the British Airports Authority being responsible for undertaking public consultation on any third runway at Heathrow!

Later this week, we shall be returning to the Finance Bill where it has its Report Stage on the floor of the Commons. The 10p tax rate issue is still unresolved and it is all coming back to haunt us. The Treasury Select Committee produced an insightful report at the weekend on the issue, which can be accessed on the Parliamentary website. In essence, the Government has given 22 million basic rate tax payers extra money, even though they did not all lose out as a result of the abolition of the 10 rate

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and, at the same time, have failed to fully compensate the 1.1 million who did lose out. I shall be supporting an amendment moved by my colleague, David Taylor, to ensure that all those losing out are compensated.

The legislative programme for the new Session has been widely publicised, but one measure in particular raises my spirits. We ~~are~~ going to get legislation to close the so called Ashcroft loophole, which allows unlimited spending by political parties between elections. The Pendle Conservatives have already spent a fortune promoting their candidate, but the legislation will, I suspect, alert people to what has been happening.

The Government has also moved on individual voter registration, though I am unclear whether this can be implemented before the General Election.

This coming week there will be much talk about the NHS 60th Anniversary and this is something we should celebrate. However, the Dazi Review is a bit of a curate's egg and I have the gravest reservations about encouraging NHS nurses to leave and set up their own organisations, which would then contract with hospital trusts and PCTs. As an inducement, they would be allowed to stay in the NHS Pension Scheme. And this is happening when Alan Johnson promised us there would be no big structural changes in the NHS. I don't know how many nurses would choose to do this, but if it is good enough for nurses, why not midwives, physiotherapists and other medical professions?

GORDON PRENTICE MP

30.6.08

REPORT TO GC MARCH 2008

This evening (Monday) the Prime Minister will be addressing the Parliamentary Labour Party after a difficult few weeks. The Budget was not particularly well received and there is a general feeling of uncertainty about where the economy is going. The housing market is slowing down and credit is becoming tighter. Of course, these difficulties are affecting the global economy in the wake of the sub-prime meltdown which led directly to the failure of Northern Rock.

The opinion polls reflect this uncertainty about the economy and we have been falling further behind the Conservatives. The situation can be turned round, but the Government has to raise its collective game. In particular, the PM must become lighter on his feet and he must look as if he is actually enjoying being Prime Minister! He must get away from the metronomic recital of lists of facts and give a much better sense of where he wants to take the country.

On Tuesday the Counter Terrorism Bill will be introduced to the House of Commons. As you know, this contains the potentially explosive proposal to increase the period of detention without trial from 28 days to 42 days. This has very few friends on the Labour side and is opposed by the Director of Public Prosecution and the former Attorney General and a former HM Inspector of Constabulary, amongst others. I hope we may be able to persuade the PM at the PLP that he needs to pause for thought on this issue. Otherwise the Government will lose.

Again tomorrow, we will get the announcement from the Post Office about the fate of the six branches here in Pendle which are earmarked for closure. My understanding is that all these will close. This is a very difficult issue for us politically, but we shall just have to weather the storm. I contacted all six Postmasters/mistresses and I think the majority want to get out. Clearly, if the Conservatives, or indeed the Liberal Democrats, want to keep the Post Office Network at its present size then they have to put their money where their mouth is. The fact is that even the National Federation of Postmasters says that some reduction in the Post Office Network is needed if the people running the branches are to make a living out of it.

Also tomorrow, Baroness Andrews, a Minister in the Department of Communities and Local Government, will be doing a walkabout in the Whitefield Ward, guided by Lord Shutt.

As you know, the East Lancashire Hospital Trust has applied for Foundation Trust status (which the Lib/Dems are resisting) and we wait to see if this is approved. I have always been against Foundation status for hospitals but if this goes through we shall need, as a Party, to think how we can best use it. The Trust will be asking the public who are interested to become members, suggesting no doubt they will be able to influence hospital policy.

Given everything that has happened over the Burnley/Blackburn transfer of services, it is as plain as a pikestaff there is a real feeling that the NHS does not take account of local opinion as it should. Ministers are aware of this (I had a meeting with Lord Darzi last week) and it is something that will have to be urgently addressed. Darzi said that changes to the NHS had to be clinically led and to be locally accountable. We need to translate these fine words into reality. Darzi also said there would be no more structural changes in the NHS. Thank goodness for that. I don't think the system could take any more "reconfiguration". Indeed the Patient & Public Involvement Forum, which locally should have been far more vocal and far more visible than it has been, is being wound up today (31 March) and will be replaced by a new system of Local Involvement Networks (LINks).

Still on Foundation Status, I am told there may be moves to allow Primary Care Trusts to follow Hospital Trusts in bidding for Foundation Status, which would allow them, like the hospitals, to have a membership base.

Finally, on health... I have asked the PCT to convene a meeting with the political leaderships of Pendle and Burnley councils (all parties) and representatives of the Hospital Trust. I want the meeting to go through the Lib Dem "dossier of complaints" addressing the issues, point by point. In my view this is now a matter of urgency. The councils are dragging their feet but we cannot possibly have an independent review without giving the local NHS an opportunity to reply to the criticisms.

I shall also press the PCT and Hospital trust to conduct a survey of medical, nursing and health workers to see what those at the front line think of the changes.

But all this is for the future. For the moment our focus should be on the challenging local elections that are coming up in May. The local Liberal Democrats are some of the dirtiest street fighters in town! We need to remind people what they say and what they do. I recall what was said a few months ago by former Lib/Dem Councillors after the sacking of the former Clerk of Barnoldswick Town Council for being too old. We were told that the Lib/Dem leadership were bullies. They can be taken on and defeated as was shown by the recent victory of the Independent candidate, Glen Whittaker, who won the by-election for Barnoldswick Town Council.

We have got good candidates standing for the Borough Council and an excellent Labour Group. We should all get stuck in.

GORDON PRENTICE MP
31.3.08

REPORT TO GC

February has been a tumultuous month at Westminster dominated, in the first half, by the unfolding saga of Northern Rock and, latterly, by the tremendous kerfuffle over MPs' expenses. The Speaker has also been getting it in the neck over his wife's taxi bills and his staff management skills which are thought to be very poor. Staff turnover in the Speaker's office is very high for people with plummy accents. Yah!

We have also had the fall-out of the Archbishop of Canterbury's reflections on Sharia law. As it happens, there was a very similar debate in Ontario, Canada in 2005 and the proposal to allow Sharia in domestic and family issues caused such an outcry it was dropped like a red hot potato.

We also had the Ronnie Flanagan review of policing which is likely to lead to more police work being done by civilians. This sounds very attractive but I believe it is fraught with dangers if we turn the police into toolled up paramilitaries concentrating on the enforcement aspect of the job. Sir Ronnie said that the police could not expect their numbers to keep growing and they had to squeeze efficiencies from the current budget. It is a sobering fact that since 1997 an extra £5 billion has gone into policing – an increase of 39% in real terms.

February was also the month when we learned that my colleague Sadiq Khan, MP for Tooting, was bugged when he visited an alleged terrorist in prison. Ministers have said that the bugging was carried out according to the rules and yet we are expected to believe that the prison and police officers involved had no idea that Khan was an MP. Pigs, methinks, will fly. Anyway, the Government has reiterated the Wilson Doctrine that MPs are not bugged or otherwise spied upon by the security services. I don't know whether to believe that or not.

On a related subject, we have the prospect of a big Parliamentary revolt next month over the Terrorism Bill. As you know, the Prime Minister has nailed his colours to the mast over the 42 day detention without charge proposal. There are many Labour MPs, including myself, who simply do not buy the argument that it is necessary to lock people up for this length of time without telling them what they are being accused of.

I had an interesting one-to-one meeting with Shami Chakrabati, the Director of Liberty, who is briefing as many MPs as she can in the run up to the debate next month. She explains quite simply that you arrest on reasonable suspicion, you charge with evidence and you convict beyond reasonable doubt. It is perfectly possible to have a reasonable suspicion, but never to be in a position to prove it.

The Government is expected to come forward with the "safeguard" of a Parliamentary debate once the Home Secretary has confirmed an Order triggering the 42 day detention. It will have happened because someone (to remain unnamed) is in custody but its effect will apply nation-wide. And we cannot debate the individual circumstances of the person detained because we won't know any of the details! The vote will undoubtedly also be whipped.

Elsewhere, the great debate on the EU Treaty rolls on, eating up huge amounts of Parliamentary time. You are either for or against a referendum. I am against.

One of the biggest events on the this month was the success of the Temporary and Agency Workers Bill – a Private Members' Bill brought in by my colleague for Ellesmere Port and Neston, Andrew Miller. The Government is opposed to the Bill but didn't have the nerve to instruct Labour MPs to vote against it. As it happens there was a huge turn out for a Friday with 150 or so Labour MPs there to back the Bill. It now goes into Committee.

Locally, the picture is still dominated by the threat of Post Office closures and my colleague, Lindsay Hoyle, has a debate on Tuesday morning in Westminster Hall on the closure programme in Lancashire. I shall be participating in that.

On Monday, I shall be welcoming a group of Nelson & Colne students to Westminster and lacing my comments on the history of the place with some easily digestible politics.

On Friday, I shall be meeting the Chief Executives of the Hospital Trust and the Primary Care Trust about the Blackburn/Burnley Hospital issue, with a meeting following on 12 March with the Health Minister, Ben Bradshaw. (12th March incidentally, is also Budget Day).

On 11 March I have arranged for the SELRAP people to give a presentation to the All Party Rail Group at Westminster. The topic is, unsurprisingly, rail re-openings, and there will be another group doing a presentation after theirs. I am arranging for all the SELRAP supporting MPs to be told of this meeting and hopefully there will be a good turn out. On the back to this meeting, I plan to get an Adjournment Debate and then a delegation to meet the Railway's Minister, who has already agreed to meet them.

You wouldn't believe it possible, but earlier today I visited Nelson Packaging, the UK's biggest manufacturer of plastic bags, on the day the Prime Minister gave his backing to a campaign to get rid of them as environmentally unfriendly.

One final thought. In today's Guardian, Simon Hoggart described me as "one of Parliament's most practiced trouble makers" Praise indeed!

GORDON PRENTICE MP
29.2.08

REPORT TO GC – NOVEMBER 2007

It has been a fascinating week at Westminster, seeing the Liberal Democrats trying hard to be on their best behaviour after leadership contenders, Chris Huhne and Nick Clegg had their memorable scrap on the BBC Politics Show last Sunday. The ballot papers have now gone out (Greaves is supporting Huhne) and the new Leader will be announced on 17 December.

But behind the smiley faces, Huhne and Clegg cannot stand each other. I have rarely seen on television two politicians of the same Party tear lumps out of each other in the way they did. Huhne says Calamity Clegg flip flops on policy, staking out positions and then retreating if the criticism becomes too fierce. In fact he detailed Clegg's inadequacies in the Calamity document which he promised to put into the public domain. Alas, that promise has been broken. (However, I have obtained a copy! aha!).

SHOWING THEIR TRUE COLOURS

Locally, the Lib Dems have shown their true colours by sacking the Clerk of Barnoldswick Town Council, Robert Kandt. Mr. Kandt wants to continue working beyond retirement age and is fully capable of doing so, but Cllr. Whipp and his friends want him out, breaching a clear commitment in the 2005 Lib Dem Manifesto that people should not be forced to retire at 65 and there should be a flexible decade of retirement. This is a perfect example of the hypocrisy which is a characteristic of the Lib Dems. In my mailing this week, we shall be circulating the Lib Dem Watch, which will chart the divisions, inconsistencies (and sometimes) nastiness of the so called nice Party. Its time we put the boot in!

After the high drama of the Huhne-Clegg clash on the Politics Show, I tuned in with anticipation to watch the first part of the three part documentary on the Blair Years. Methinks he is keeping a few tales up his sleeve for his £5 million autobiography, but he did talk revealingly about the Government's drive to introduce top-up fees – something specifically ruled out in the Election Manifesto. As you know, the policy was carried in the House of Commons by 5 or 6 votes and, reflecting on what happened, Blair told the viewers that sometimes you had to do what you thought was right. I have my own views about what is right!

ON THE ROCKS!

The Government has, unfortunately, had its own travails with a series of set-backs starting with the collapse of the Northern Rock – now shored up with public money – through to the loss of the Child Benefit discs and last night a broadside from former Chiefs of the Defence Staff who say that the Government is neglecting the armed forces. All this comes on top of the bad press we got following the “non Election”.

I am sure we will get through these difficulties, but public perception is always a problem. It is as plain as a pikestaff that the Chancellor of the Exchequer was not personally responsible for the loss, by the private company TNT, of the two Child Benefit discs. In fact, the Chairman of Customs & Excise, Paul Gray, has resigned for the operational failure and it is right that he did.

Next week at Westminster we have the new Health and Social Care Bill, which will establish a new regulator – the Care Quality Commission. I hope this is not going to be the beginning of another torrent of NHS re-organisation, we have had enough of that. On Tuesday, the Housing and Regeneration Bill which will support the delivery of 3 million new homes by 2020. It also sets up the Homes and Communities Agency and will reform regulation on social housing.

My campaign to force Ashcroft to state whether he is a UK resident for tax purposes gathers pace. As you know, Ashcroft is a Vice Chairman of the Conservative Party and is bank-rolling our Conservative opponents here in Pendle to the tune of £25,000. I have said on many occasions that it is intolerable to have people in parliament who make our laws, but do not pay our taxes. That is why I am introducing the Parliamentary Disqualification (Tax Exiles) Bill which will force the Ashcrofts of this world to declare whether they pay UK taxes. I came twentieth in the annual Private members Ballot so my Bill stands no chance of becoming law, but it will get publicity and I hope, will encourage the Government to insert similar provisions in the Constitutional Reform Bill which is being brought in early next year.

Earlier today I met with the SELRAP people who are tirelessly campaigning for the re-opening of the Colne-Skipton link. I shall be at their press conference next Friday, formally launching their business case document. David Curry will be there with me. I have got a meeting with the Railways Minister, Tom Harris, and will be taking a delegation to London in the New Year to take the campaign forward.

I also visited a couple of organisations in receipt of Lottery money, in the company of the North West Regional Manager, Helen Bullough. Our first port of call was the Holden Centre in Barrowford, where a team of skilled and dedicated people look after profoundly disabled pre-school children. The £50,000 of Lottery money paid for a Sensory Experience Room, with flashing lights, oily bubbles drifting to the ceiling, videos, and fluorescent spaghetti, all stimulating the children. Money well spent, I'd say.

We then went on to visit ITHAAD, round the corner in Cross Street, to find out more about their "Women into Employment" project. I believe there is a pressing need to get more Muslim women into work and this remains a top priority.

This morning, along with other colleagues from the Party, I attended Julie Hunting's funeral at Sacred Heart in Colne. Julie had been a Pendle Labour Councillor for a number of years, but became less active. She died at the tragically early age of 38.

Next Friday we have the Silverman Lecture and I am sure we are all looking forward to it and I hope for a good turnout.

GORDON PRENTICE MP

23.11.07

• 100 more changes, more
• private: better
CATS REPORT TO GC - NOVEMBER 2007

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SHOWING THEIR TRUE COLOURS

Locally, the Lib Dems have shown their true colours by sacking the Clerk of Barnoldswick Town Council, Robert Kandt. Mr. Kandt wants to continue working beyond retirement age and is fully capable of doing so, but Cllr. Whipp and his friends want him out, breaching a clear commitment in the 2005 Lib Dem Manifesto that people should not be forced to retire at 65 and there should be a flexible decade of retirement. This is a perfect example of the hypocrisy which is a characteristic of the Lib Dems. In my mailing this week, we shall be circulating the Lib Dem Watch, which will chart the divisions, inconsistencies (and sometimes) nastiness of the so called nice Party. Its time we put the boot in!

After the high drama of the Huhne-Clegg clash on the Politics Show, I tuned in with anticipation to watch the first part of the three part documentary on the Blair Years. Methinks he is keeping a few tales up his sleeve for his £5 million autobiography, but he did talk revealingly about the Government's drive to introduce top-up fees – something specifically ruled out in the Election Manifesto. As you know, the policy was carried in the House of Commons by 5 or 6 votes and, reflecting on what happened, Blair told the viewers that sometimes you had to do what you thought was right. I have my own views about what is right!

ON THE ROCKS!

The Government has, unfortunately, had its own travails with a series of set-backs starting with the collapse of the Northern Rock – now shored up with public money – through to the loss of the Child Benefit discs and last night a broadside from former Chiefs of the Defence Staff who say that the Government is neglecting the armed forces. All this comes on top of the bad press we got following the "non Election".

I am sure we will get through these difficulties, but public perception is always a problem. It is as plain as a pikestaff that the Chancellor of the Exchequer was not personally responsible for the loss, by the private company TNT, of the two Child Benefit discs. In fact, the Chairman of Customs & Excise, Paul Gray, has resigned for the operational failure and it is right that he did.

↳ direct lower minimum
rate

May - Feb. May. May 21st of my Queen's
University Service
- election extended
competitive credit
Trevor: N Rocke Nationalise the bank
- Healthcare
Commission

Next week at Westminster we have the new Health and Social Care Bill, which will establish a new regulator – the Care Quality Commission. I hope this is not going to be the beginning of another torrent of NHS re-organisation, we have had enough of that. On Tuesday, the Housing and Regeneration Bill which will support the delivery of 3 million new homes by 2020. It also sets up the Homes and Communities Agency and will reform regulation on social housing.

2004.

Eco towns

Ashcroft
Penult
Custome

My campaign to force Ashcroft to state whether he is a UK resident for tax purposes gathers pace. As you know, Ashcroft is a Vice Chairman of the Conservative Party and is bank-rolling our Conservative opponents here in Pendle to the tune of £25,000. I have said on many occasions that it is intolerable to have people in parliament who make our laws, but do not pay our taxes. That is why I am introducing the Parliamentary Disqualification (Tax Exiles) Bill which will force the Ashcrofts of this world to declare whether they pay UK taxes. I came twentieth in the annual Private members Ballot so my Bill stands no chance of becoming law, but it will get publicity and I hope, will encourage the Government to insert similar provisions in the Constitutional Reform Bill which is being brought in early next year.

Salrop

Earlier today I met with the SELRAP people who are tirelessly campaigning for the re-opening of the Colne-Skipton link. I shall be at their press conference next Friday, formally launching their business case document. David Curry will be there with me. I have got a meeting with the Railways Minister, Tom Harris, and will be taking a delegation to London in the New Year to take the campaign forward.

I also visited a couple of organisations in receipt of Lottery money, in the company of the North West Regional Manager, Helen Bullough. Our first port of call was the Holden Centre in Barrowford, where a team of skilled and dedicated people look after profoundly disabled pre-school children. The £50,000 of Lottery money paid for a Sensory Experience Room, with flashing lights, oily bubbles drifting to the ceiling, videos, and fluorescent spaghetti, all stimulating the children. Money well spent, I'd say.

We then went on to visit ITHAAD, round the corner in Cross Street, to find out more about their “Women into Employment” project. I believe there is a pressing need to get more Muslim women into work and this remains a top priority.

This morning, along with other colleagues from the Party, I attended Julie Hunting's funeral at Sacred Heart in Colne. Julie had been a Pendle Labour Councillor for a number of years, but became less active. She died at the tragically early age of 38.

Next Friday we have the Silverman Lecture and I am sure we are all looking forward to it and I hope for a good turnout.

GORDON PRENTICE MP
23.11.07

REPORT TO GC – OCTOBER 2007

A transformation in the political landscape has occurred in the last month. Until mid-September, the Prime Minister was enjoying a “Brown bounce” but his vacillations and unnecessary prevarication over the Election has, for the moment, damaged his credibility.

As it happens, he spoke to me in September but didn’t give much away (more about this later!). As I indicated in my written report to the September GC, an early election was a complete no brainer. We have a majority of 66 and with the boundary revisions that will be in place at the next election, our notional majority drops to 45. Even if we had won the election, everyone would have painted it as a humiliating defeat if Labour had been returned with a majority of fewer than 66.

We now know that there will be no election until 2009 or, possibly, 2010. And over the next 18 months or so we shall have to knuckle down and govern well. As I explained last month, we have a full programme of Bills which will be coming up in the new session which starts on 6 November. Brown has flagged up constitutional change as a priority and he has my support on this.

The Blair era left some stains, not least the so-called cash for peerages affair. I seem to have lived and breathed this issue for years, wearing my hat as a member of the Commons Public Administration Select Committee. We had already done one report on the Honours System and started to embark on another when Assistant Commissioner Yates from Scotland Yard turned up to ask us to suspend our Parliamentary Inquiry, to allow the police to do theirs. We all know that there was no evidence strong enough to persuade the Crown Prosecution Service to prosecute anyone. I could have told Yates that 18 months ago! There was never going to be a scrap of paper showing a trade in peerages existed – it is all done by nods and winks.

In the 2005 Honours List (the one the police investigated) the initial draft had eight people who had given Labour millions. In the final submission four of these names went up to the House of Lords Appointments Commission as part of the “propriety test”. The Commission blocked the names. Their decision leaked. And the rest is history.

We know that there is a strong correlation between giving big money to political parties (not just Labour) and getting into the legislature. The system has got to change. People should not be able to buy their way into Parliament and honours should be completely separate from peerages.

In late September and early October I was in Taiwan having a close look at their transport system. They have just completed a new high speed railway from Taipei in the north to the main city in the south west of this island, which is about 200 miles north to south. The train has proved to be so successful that all domestic commercial flying has now stopped. It has come at a price as the new railway cost \$16 billion, but it will rapidly transform the economy. I also had the opportunity to tackle the Taiwanese Minister of Transport on the aero-engine order which is about to be placed by China Airlines (which is a Taiwanese private company, but one influenced by the Government there).

In 2003, Rolls Royce put in what was clearly the best bid for a large aero-engine contract, which, in the event, went to the American firm General Electric. The latest order is for 10 planes and for 40 engines. That's a lot of work for Barnoldswick.

Our own UK high speed train opens for business next month from Folkestone up to St. Pancras in London, but Ministers have told me there is no possibility of extending the railway north until at least 2012. This is tragic. A fast link between London and say Leeds or Manchester would change the face of England

Locally, the campaign to re-open the Skipton to Colne railway continues to build up steam with the publication of a new consultant's report giving the total cost of a single track as £42 million and a double track £81 million. I am pressing the Government to set up a dedicated unit within the Department of Transport to help organisations such as SELRAP develop their proposals. That said, SELRAP has come a long way.

The NHS continues to hit the headlines. And the latest issue involves the transfer of some cancer services from Airedale to Bradford Royal Infirmary. Airedale is, of course, in Ann Cryer's Keighley constituency, but many people living in West Craven have a strong attachment to Airedale.

Earlier today I visited the Pendle Valley Practice at Yarnspinners and had an opportunity to speak to the doctors and all the other people in the medical team. It is a time of great uncertainty, but everyone I spoke to seemed optimistic, given the huge amount of money the Government had put into the NHS. Burnley, Pendle & Rossendale is one of the 25% of PCTs which are "under doctored" and the Government has committed itself to investing in at least 100 new GP practices with up to 900 GPs, nurses and health care assistants in a determined attempt to tackle health inequalities. Pendle has the unenviable record of having the highest infant mortality in the country and this is something we must work hard to address.

If we have had our problems, the Lib Dems are providing great amusement following their second regicide in two years. I personally feel sorry for Ming Campbell, but he never appeared at ease with himself at PMQs or, indeed, talking about anything other than foreign affairs. He had only one club in his golf bag, he could be magisterial, but couldn't convincingly appear angry, outraged or upset. By contrast, our previous Prime Minister was a true thespian, who had a voice for every occasion.

On Monday I had the opportunity to chat to his Lordship Tony Greaves about recent events in his Party. He told me bluntly he never supported Ming Campbell and doesn't think much of Clegg or Huhne. He also disclosed that the Lib Dem candidate for Pendle is no longer the candidate. Apparently he was a rushed choice in the expectation of an early election. The local Lib Dems advertised for a candidate a year ago, but no one came forward who was good enough!

GORDON PRENTICE MP
26.10.07

REPORT TO GC: 28 September 2007

Tonight I give my apologies for absence. As the GC is meeting I shall be on my way to Taiwan. It is a Parliamentary visit primarily to look at the rail system there but there is a full programme planned involving meetings with the President and Taiwanese MPs. The situation with China is fraught. I shall give a blow by blow account at the October GC!

This morning I spoke to the school assembly at St Philip's CE Primary School about democracy and elections. They are having their school council elections next week and the headteacher thought it would be a good idea to invite me along. Half way through the session I paused and asked the children how I was doing.

OK! They chorused. They are great kids.

All the talk at Party Conference seemed to be about the election and when it would be. Robert, as our delegate, will be giving his own report on what happened at Bournemouth but I believe there will not be an election this year. This is not to say we shouldn't be prepared, but I don't think it will happen.

Talk of an election keeps the Labour party disciplined and everyone in line. And it destabilizes our opponents. But loose talk of an election can take on a momentum of its own and could become a self fulfilling prophesy. That is why the PM will have to signal soon what he is going to do.

Why do I believe an election is unlikely? The Parliament still has two and a half years to run and Brown has a solid Labour majority of over 60. An early election which produces a smaller majority would be seen as a defeat.

The polls, which are currently favourable to us, could swing dramatically the other way. If another bank goes down or blue tongue takes off!

True, arguments can be made for going early. I read that Cherie Blair's £1 million autobiography will be published next year and I am sure she will be saying some choice things about Broon! (The kind of things that were excised from Alistair Campbell's diaries.)

Locally, the main focus in the NHS will be the ending of blue light Accident and Emergency at Burnley General on 1 November this year. Now that the decision has been made, I hope everything goes seamlessly and there are no problems. However, as I mentioned before, it may be worth asking someone from the Ambulance service or, perhaps, Tim Ellis from Unison to come to a future meeting. He could talk about NHS changes more generally.

On the Silverman lecture, Jon Trickett's offer to speak still stands. I would like him to be this year's guest speaker.

GORDON PRENTICE MP
28 September 2007

REPORT TO GC – AUGUST 2007

We are now well into the Brown Premiership and there is change in the air. It is quite amazing how quickly the caravan moves on. After taking us all by surprise by appointing a Government “of all the talents” in which he hoped to include Paddy Ashdown (!) and did in fact include Digby Jones and Admiral West (Retd.), things have settled down into the usual rhythm of government. We are eight points ahead of the Conservatives in the polls so the “Brown bounce” is continuing a bit longer than expected.

There are some clouds on the horizon on the public sector pay settlement front and on the EU Treaty/Constitution issue, but I am sure the focus will change to the Government legislative programme when we return to Westminster. Brown made a point of signalling change from Blair’s sofa style of government by having early Cabinet Meetings which actually discussed things. He also published a programme of major constitutional change and we will see a Constitutional Change Bill in the Queen’s Speech. It will require Parliamentary approval before the country goes to war and before the armed forces are deployed abroad. It will also transfer to Parliament many prerogative powers, exercised by the Prime Minister in the name of the Monarch. It will also put the Civil Service on a statutory footing – something the previous Prime Minister resisted for years.

WEEKEND VOTING?

We will also see an increase in Parliament’s scrutiny of Government and this is to be welcomed. There are also proposals to “reinvigorate our democracy” including possibly, voting at weekends rather than on Thursdays. All in all, these are sound proposals that have received wide backing and I support them.

In a break from convention, the Brown Government published the draft legislative programme for the new Parliamentary Session starting in November. Previously, we all heard it first from the Queen, reading through the script in a royal monotone. In the next Session there will be at least 23 Bills, including a few that are likely to be quite contentious. There will be a Bill to agree the EU Reform Treaty, although, as you know, many people are pressing for a referendum.

AN AIRPORT ON YOUR DOORSTEP

There will also be a Planning Reform Bill which is intended to streamline procedures on the infrastructure projects. We all know about the Heathrow Terminal 5 Inquiry which dragged on for five years I think. But going to the other extreme of undue haste, may trigger a reaction if an appointed planning body takes controversial decisions on, say, the siting of a new airport or a nuclear power station.

There will be a new Child Maintenance Bill sorting out the mess of the CSA and allowing for the simplification of the process by which child maintenance is assessed. As you know, there are two systems running in parallel at the moment – old cases before 2003 and “new cases” with people in exactly the same circumstances having to pay hugely different sums of money. It is unfair but the Government says that transferring the old cases to the new would break the system.

CLIMATE CHANGE

We will also get the much touted Climate Change Bill which will set statutory targets to reduce UK Carbon dioxide emissions by at least 60% by 2060. It is amazing how terms such as carbon footprint move into the mainstream vocabulary. We shall get another Criminal Justice and Immigration Bill (when do we not?) but this one will raise civil liberties issues. The Bill will bring in Violence Offender Orders which will allow the courts to impose post sentence restrictions on those convicted of violent offences including residence or movement restrictions.

The Education and Skills Bill will raise to 18 the minimum age at which young people leave education before training. A Pensions Bill is expected as is another one on Health and Social Care, bringing in one system of registration that applies to all providers of health and adult social care, including NHS providers. As Her Majesty would say, “other measures will be laid before you”!

PARTNERSHIP IN POWER

The new Prime Minister has also planned to encourage engagement with the Party, building on the Partnership in Power process which has, alas, become discredited over the years. Brown’s attention has focused on the role of Conference and the central proposition to end the practice of debating contemporary resolutions.

The former Assistant General Secretary of the Party, David Gardener, has written that the document “Extending and Renewing Party Democracy” sounds very promising but on closer examination raises serious concerns. He takes the view, and I agree with him, that if this goes through it would cut off “the one safety valve that was an essential feature of the original PiP settlement”. He says that Conference should be able to express, in a constructive and open way, its view through a vote. Last year, Conference was denied a vote on Trident when there was clearly a case for it in the run up to the Commons vote. Would we have had a Trident vote if Brown and not Blair had been PM? On the basis of Brown’s document, I suspect not.

WHIPP CRACKED

Locally, we all learned that Cllr. David Whipp gets stressed out! In a long piece in the Telegraph he made it clear that he ended up in hospital because of his work load. I think the best advice we can give him is to give up (a) his County Councillor role (b) his District seat (c) his Parish Council seat (d) his Police Authority seat (e) his West Craven Together seat. But I suspect not!

The Liberals, as always, pose a real threat to us and they are waiting to pounce if the transfer of A&E from Burnley to Blackburn on 1 November goes wrong. I am in touch with the PCT following publication of a report from the Sheffield University which stated the obvious – that people with breathing difficulties were less likely to survive a long ambulance journey than a shorter one! Now that the decision on transfer has been made, I want it all to go smoothly so that people can wonder afterwards what all the fuss was about. I see there are also possible transfers of functions from Airedale to Bradford and I am looking into this.

Again, locally, I have been out and about visiting the new Rainhall Road Community Centre in Barnoldswick, which is very impressive. The Management Committee is, unfortunately, infested with Lib/Dems who are now claiming credit for a project they initially opposed. The bulk of the money came from the Government's Market Town's Initiative through the body West Craven Together.

BOUNDARY MILL

Yesterday, I visited Richard Bannister, the owner of Boundary Mill and employer of a certain Alan Davies, Leader of Pendle Council. I took the opportunity of raising the controversial issue of Mrs. Brown's fence which was erected at the bottom of her garden, destroying her view of Pendle Hill which she had enjoyed for the past 40 years. As you all know, Mrs. Brown is the sister of the late Len Dole and she secured huge press coverage about the issue. I was left with the impression that Bannister will think again, but I do not want to raise Mrs. Brown's hopes only to have them dashed.

Bannister took me round the construction site and the scale of it is truly awesome. It is twice the size of an aircraft hangar and on two floors, with a restaurant at the front and Bannister's office above, allowing him a clear uninterrupted view of Pendle Hill!

He told me that his company employs over 800 people in Pendle, so it's a huge operation. He reminded me that retailing is now one of the UK's biggest industries. No doubt, buying lots of stuff from China.

CHINA

At the end of next month, I shall be going to Taiwan to see the rail system there – complete with bullet trains – but will also have the opportunity to meet the State President. Taiwan is only recognised by a handful of countries because the People's Republic of China has made it clear that they will not recognise countries that recognise Taiwan. Taiwan is applying for membership of the United Nations and is lobbying like mad for support. With a population of about 23 million (about the same as Australia) it will undoubtedly be knocked back.

I have been to mainland China and for many years was closely involved in the China Group at Westminster. And it is absolutely clear that China proper regards Taiwan as one of its lost provinces. They want an arrangement like Hong Kong or Macao – one country two systems. But the Taiwanese are not interested. They would say communist China, or market socialism China, is an authoritarian, one Party state, with no free speech and they are not swapping what they have got for that.

The Taiwanese have talked about having a referendum on statehood, but are very nervous as Beijing has said this would be a provocation tantamount to a declaration of war. The United States' Sixth Fleet bobs about in the South China Sea keeping an eye on things. So, all in all, it is an interesting time to go there.

GORDON PRENTICE MP
31.8.07

REPORT TO GC JUNE 2007

The big news of the week (or perhaps the decade) has been the hand over of power from Tony Blair to Gordon Brown. It all went amazingly smoothly and those of you watching television on Wednesday would have seen the House of Commons stand and applaud the man who had been Prime Minister for 10 years. I was on my feet with the rest of them acknowledging the achievement of staying at the political apex for so long.

Prime Ministers Questions on Wednesday confirmed Blair as a master of the art. He cracked some good jokes and seemed his usual relaxed self, although he admitted feeling twinges of apprehension at three minutes to noon – and he had felt this nervousness at PMQs throughout his time as Prime Minister. I look back on the Blair Premiership and marvel at the way in which he changed the Party and got it to accept policies that, I believe, went against the grain. It was under Tony Blair that we crossed the Parliamentary Rubicon of getting legislation through on the back of Conservative votes. If, for example, the Conservatives had voted against the war in Iraq, we would not have gone in. But all that is history now and we look with anticipation to the future.

As I write this (at 6pm on Friday) I have no information on the junior Ministerial posts, but the Cabinet appointments have been made and they certainly signal change. I was very much in favour of a wholesale clear-out and Gordon Brown has certainly not disappointed. That said, my colleagues at Westminster were totally mystified as to why he should bring Shaun Woodward, the Tory defector, into the Cabinet as Northern Ireland Secretary. Perhaps it was simply to make the point that his Government would be open to all the talents – except Woodward is not universally regarded as being talented. There was also some concern about loading on to Des Browne the additional responsibility for Scotland, even post devolution. As Defence Secretary, Browne already has his hands full with Iraq and Afghanistan and expecting him to carry this additional burden does seem perverse.

On Wednesday morning in the Member's cloakroom I did bump into our new comrade, Quentin Davies. He is the latest refugee from the Conservative Party and brings with him loadsamoney, membership of three premier London clubs, including Whites and virulent pro-hunting views. He acknowledged my cheery hello comrade, but I suspect we shall see very little of him at the Labour end of the Member's tearoom. I think he shall get his reward in due course, with a seat in the Lords.

The winner of the Deputy Leadership contest, Harriet Harman, is now Chair of the Party (Hazel Blears having gone on to become Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government). It seems clear that Harman will not become Deputy Prime Minister. She will, however, take over Jack Straw's old job as Leader of the House – managing Commons business. I understand that John Cruddas was offered the role of Deputy Chair of the Party under Harman, but turned it down.

Now that the Leadership election is behind us I hope the NEC will give serious consideration to reviewing the rules and procedures. We are very fortunate indeed that we did not have a contested Leadership election where the result was knife-edge – and I say that as someone who wanted a challenge to Gordon Brown to flush out his

views on areas of policy where we don't know his thinking. His approach to Paddy Ashdown certainly shocked me!

This would have highlighted the weird and wonderful anomalies that are built into our Electoral College. For example, only MPs can nominate but MPs and MEPs form one third of the Electoral College. MSPs and AMs have no role. I am told that MPs have a say in the Party leader in Scotland, but MSPs don't!

Locally, we have seen the Liberal Democrats retain control of the Craven Ward in Barnoldswick. Craven has never been fertile territory for us and the Liberal Democrats are well dug in. That said, we shall have to think creatively about re-vitalising the Party in those areas of Pendle where it is dead on its feet. We are all grateful to Ian Tweedie for flying the flag. I know that the Campaign Committee will be looking at ways of reaching out to voters. And I shall be doing a Parliamentary Report later in the year which will go to all households in the Constituency.

As always, we have a story to tell and, in many respects, a good one. Last week I visited Pendle Vale College to see the new school under construction. Nothing prepared me for the scale of the project. The building work is only one third complete and it looks huge. The school, costing £31 million, will be a superb facility for the young people and for the area. Its doors will open for business in September next year. I had an opportunity to chat to the newly appointed Head, Steve Wilson, who has been involved in education in Pendle for many years. I think he previously taught at Primet and I met the Head there, Janet Walsh, last month. There are concerns about the impact the new "super schools" will have on the existing pattern of provision. But we shall have to work our way through that.

I have also been over to Marsden Heights for a briefing with the Head, Mike Tull. Progress there has been delayed as a result of challenges put forward by local groups objecting to building on Bent Head.

Earlier today, I met Alan Green, the new Chair, of the East Lancashire Hospitals NHS Trust at the Royal Blackburn Infirmary and we had plenty to talk about. As you know, the Trust has embarked on a programme of redundancies as one way of eliminating the deficit. A number of Matrons are to lose their jobs and (as I have said many times before) it takes real skill to put so much money into the NHS and end up sacking people. I have been invited to speak to the Nurses at Accrington Hospital next month about change in the NHS and, no doubt, these contentious staffing issues. The controversial downgrading of Burnley A&E to an Urgent Care Centre is, I believe, to be completed by 1 November, by which time the Ambulance Service has got to be well and truly up to speed.

We also touched on the use of the private sector – the CATS issue as it has gone very quiet in recent months. I shall be touching on many of these issues next Friday when I meet the Chief Executive of the PCT, David Peat.

GORDON PRENTICE MP : 30.6.07